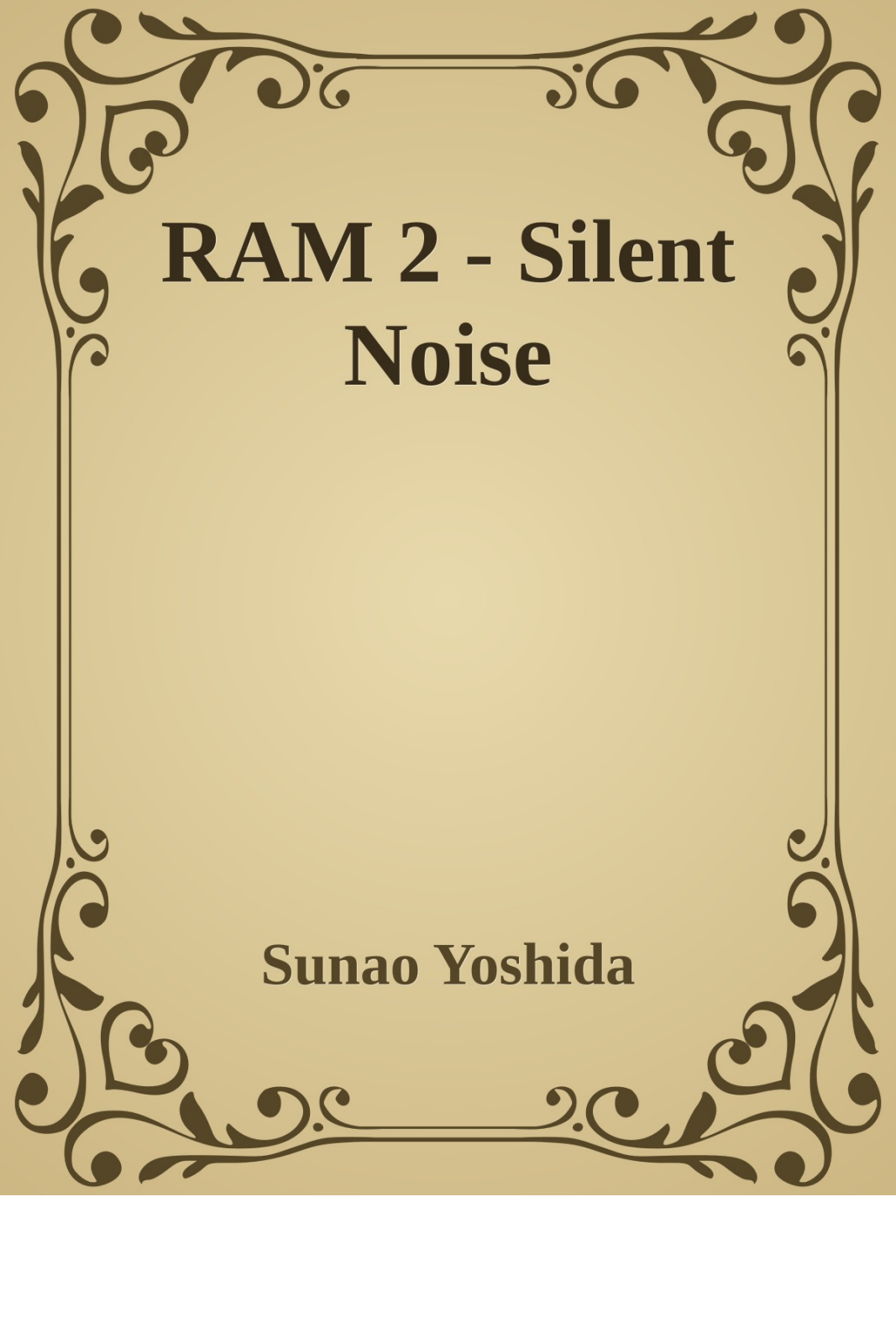


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark brown color, framing the central text.

RAM 2 - Silent Noise

Sunao Yoshida

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VOLUME 2: SILENT+ NOISE

TRINITY BLOOD

RAGE AGAINST THE MOONS

BY SUNAO YOSHIDA



Trinity Blood

Rage Against the Moons

Silent Noise

Sunao Yoshida

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epub by: jianreyes02

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THE CHARACTERS IN TRINITY BLOOD RAGE AGAINST THE MOONS



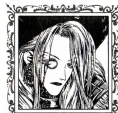
ABEL NIGHTROAD



NOELLE BOR



HUGUE DE WATEAU



CATERINA SFORZA



TRES IQUO



ALFONSO D'ESTE



LEON GARCIA DE ASTURIAS



KATE SCOTT

Abel Nightroad—Oddball priest, AX Agent "Crusik"
Caterina Sforza—Cardinal & Foreign Affairs Minister
Leon Garcia de Asturias—AX Agent "Dandelion"
Noelle Bor—Former AX Agent "Mistress"
Tres Iquo—Android priest, AX Agent "Gunslinger"
Kate Scott—Holographic nun, AX Agent "Iron Maiden"



ISAAK FERNAND VON KAMPFER

Hugue de Wateau—Noble priest, AX Agent "Swindler"
Alfonso d'Este—Archbishop of Cologne
Isak Fernand von Kampfer—Rosenkreuz *Golden Order's* Invariant, "Wizard of Witches"



Neverland

Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones.

— *Matthew 18:01*

I

"How many years has it been, Abel?" the man sitting on the other side of the bulletproof glass asked. The jailer already had been chased away.

Abel Nightroad spoke the number his boss had told him: "Seven thousand three hundred days. . . . It's been twenty years." He paused. "Will you speak with me?"

The man reminded Abel of a carnivorous beast with his swarthy face (a characteristic of a southern lineage) and his gracefully muscular frame. His hair, extending over his broad shoulders, was vividly reminiscent of a lion's mane. The prisoner's grimy garb didn't contradict his majestic appearance.

Abel sighed. "First, please look at this photograph. Last month, in the ocean north of Albion, a freighter was attacked by a band of vampires. Eight people died. This is the corpse of one of the attackers."

The man's eyes abruptly narrowed as his gaze dropped to the table. The photograph was of a boy not yet ten years old. Dark bullet holes had been drilled into his blood-smeared body. Although the man didn't like children, the sight was pitiful enough to make him temporarily avert his eyes.

He immediately noticed the transparent protuberances, which resembled the papery wings of an insect and extended from the child's back: This proved the boy couldn't be human. In addition, savage fangs protruded from his wide-open mouth.

"Fairy. It's a rare subspecies of vampire. How did you manage to kill it?"

"I didn't. By chance, a human hunter was on board. More interesting, however, is the fact that ships have continued to

disappear, one after the other, in this specific area of the ocean. ... It's just as before—"

"Skip the bonus commentary. If AX is moving, it's not due to the typical panic over a vampire attack, is it?"

Abel nodded, taking out another photograph. This picture was of a nondescript park; shabbily dressed children faced the camera with frightened eyes. The boy in the center of the group was a fairy, quite similar to the one in the previous photograph.

"Michael Darling — born in Londinium City in the Albion Kingdom. A half year ago, he was abducted from a children's welfare institution. By the way, the investigation of his family came up completely clean. There was nothing genetically linking him with vampires."

"So, he was turned while he was missing?"

"Yes, he's a convert—absolutely a post-birth vampire."

Vampires were a different species of sentient life that suddenly had appeared in the wake of the Armageddon. The origin of the term "vampire" was rooted in legends from antiquity. Bloodsucking behavior, unnatural physical strength, fatal weaknesses including exposure to sunlight and silver — almost all those traits were central characteristics of the vampires described in legends. It had to do with their ecology. However, there was one big difference between the vampires of today and the vampires of folklore: Namely, vampirism was seldom contagious.

According to legend, vampires' victims also turned into vampires, and their numbers multiplied at the rate of rabbits accordingly. In reality, the probability that victims of blood-sucking behavior would turn into vampires wasn't quite one tenth of a percent. The post-birth vampire phenomenon, which was called "conversion," was very rare.

"Conversion is said to depend on the victims' genetic predisposition and the assailant vampire's nature, but that idea hasn't been explicated. We know that cases of conversion are rare."

"Rare, but they exist. Remember Alexander Scott, former Bishop of Londinium, who killed the Seven Sisters? Weren't you in charge of that incident?" Pursing his plump, well-shaped lips, the prisoner crossed his manacle-bound arms over his chest.

"I didn't realize it was so important. So, who is it? This old man?" Abel asked, placing a third photograph on the table. A middle-aged gentleman with fleshy cheeks and an expression full of affection smiled at the camera. "Former Londinium Integrated University Medical faculty's department head, Professor James Barrie. He's an Albion nobleman who's also a famous author of fairytales. He's retired at present, spending his remaining days in his territory."

"Well, I'm jealous. So, what about this happy old man?"

"A child kidnapping syndicate abducted Darling. The AX and Albion authorities have been trying to expose it, but ..."

"You failed?"

"Three minutes before we were going to break into their hideout, it blew up," Abel explained, setting down a fourth photograph. It contained ruins that looked as if a giant had trampled over a papier-mâché building. Scattered roof tiles had been demolished into powder.

"Hmph. This wasn't a result of gunpowder, was it?"

"According to Gypsy Queen, the agent in charge of the investigation, evidence suggests that a high-frequency weapon might have been used. Luckily, thanks to the client list left behind, we learned that someone had adopted ten children, including Darling, from this facility."

"James Barrie."

"Yes. Incidentally, his territory is a small island not twenty miles away from the . . . problematic . . . ocean area."

The prisoner wore a cynical expression, as if he'd expected that answer. "Heh heh, indeed. By the way, how's that gloomy *pistolero*? Isn't this a job for that guy?"

"Father Tres was injured on his last assignment; he's recuperating in Milan right now. So, will you take the work?"

"I hate assignments involving children. They're all kinds of trouble."

"Then, you refuse?"

"I didn't say that. If you shorten my sentence twenty years, I'll capture San Pietro Cathedral itself." The man bared his teeth in something like a smile. A metallic sound rang out as he shifted. Mysteriously, the manacles that had been secured about his wrists until now instantly disappeared. "Can I leave at once? if procedure makes that troublesome, then can I at least leave by the method of my choice?"

"I'll speak to the warden." Abel rang a hand bell. From beyond the thick iron doors, a jailer appeared. He came into the room carrying a neatly pressed priest's robe in his arms.

"Please, change your clothes here, Dandelion—or should I say, AX Agent Father Leon Garcia de Asturias."

"Sí, señor"



II

"Do you remember the world outside, Wendy?" Peter asked, peering into a pale face somewhat shrouded by a hood.

In the fading light of the sun, which was sinking below the horizon, the ocean was stained the color of blood. It was another beginning—a brand-new day.

"Wendy, when you were small, you went to the outside world, right? Could you see these sights there, too?"

"Yes, but the sights there weren't this pretty, and they weren't all sunsets like this." The final drops of sunlight melted away. Wary, Wendy removed her hood and sighed. "I saw both oceans and forests. This island is the most wonderful place in the world, though. In the world beyond, adults pollute things."

"After all, it's the adults' fault. Why do adults do so many bad things? You and the others—"

"Stop!" she shouted, afraid. Her face had turned white. She shook, hugging her shoulders. "Please, stop talking about adults. I don't want to hear it!"

"S-sorry! I'm sorry, Wendy!" Hastily, Peter rubbed his hand in soothing circles across Wendy's back. "It's okay. It's okay, Wendy. I'll kill them! I'll kill anybody who torments you, Wendy, Don't cry, please!"

"Right." Ducking beneath the strands of her buckwheat hair, she barely succeeded in producing a smile. Yes, I'm the first big sister to come to this island. I can't worry my little brother like this. "That's right, Peter. I have you with me. I don't need to be afraid of any adults."

"Yeah! I'll kill them all for you!"

"Thank you, Peter. I'm relying on you."

The stars began to show. Soon, it would be time for the other children to get up.

Placing her hand on the boy's head, Wendy stood up lightly. "Come, we need to fix dinner. Peter, bring some milk from the cowshed." Wendy noticed that he wasn't listening to her.

He was gazing absently at the sky. "Say, what kind of bird is that?"

The shadow of the mysterious "bird" belched smoke. As they watched, the creature grew bigger.

"Peter, gather everyone in the school!" Wendy pointed at the slight hill where a building with a tall belfry rested. She couldn't keep her voice from becoming shrill with nervousness. "Hurry! I'll go and examine that."

"I'm going, too!"

"It's dangerous! You stay with everyone else."

"No! If you're going, so am I, Wendy."

She sighed again. "I guess it can't be helped." Touching the boy's cheek, which had stiffened with tension, she smiled. "Fine. We'll go together."

"Ow!"

At the exact moment the craft landed on the water, the flight gauge struck him directly in the face. His body was thrown backward, and a streak of red blood gushed up in a high arch. Stirred around in all directions like it was trapped by a mixer, the floating plane finally washed up on the sandy beach and sputtered to a stop.

"Hey, we're here, my dear passenger."

"I-I-I thought I was going to die. Couldn't you land a little more gently, Father Leon? When you do it this way, I can't tell a water landing from a crash." Stuffing a tissue into his bloody nostril, Abel glared at his companion. Crawling down to the shore, he noticed that cracks ran through the machine's body, and the engine was smoking.

"It can't be helped. Oh dear, this jalopy is going to burst into flames any minute now."

"Doesn't this flying machine belong to one your contacts, Leon? What do you mean by using this kind of antique deathtrap?"

"Unfortunately, my connection's hangar was practically empty, so this was the best choice. It was cheap."

Leon often would boast, "If you front the money, I can supply you with anything from airplanes to coffins." Abel wondered if Leon had considered selling airplanes and coffins in sets. "Ah, this is terrible. Maybe we can squeeze a lot of free reparations out of your contact for this. When we go back, what will I tell everyone in Accounting?"

"Don't worry: The radio is broken. Even if we wanted to go back, we couldn't return—for the time being, at least."

"Oh, well then, I'm relieved. . . . Wh-what!" The tissue erupted from Abel's nose. On the verge of fainting, he drew closer to Leon, who was combing the stubble on his chin. "The radio is broken? Then, we're . . . shipwrecked?"

"Well, you could look at it that way."

"How can you be so calm? Dear God, if you were going to send me into a survival situation with an old man like this, I'd rather be dead. Waaa—!"

The silver-haired priest, who had been wailing as if it were the end of the world, suddenly went silent. Abel had fallen facedown on the sand. He looked like a squished frog. There was a lump on the back of his head and a fist-sized rock lying next to him.

"Hey, are you alive?" Leon looked down with interest at his strangely silent companion. There was no answer, but Abel started to twitch, so Leon figured he was all right. "So, this is what death looks like? Dear Lord, he was a gloomy, brazen, poor man, but . . . well, he wasn't a bad guy. Go straight to heaven, Abel."

Leon gracefully caught the rock that suddenly came at him. His meaty palm clamped shut over the stone, and he called out to his unseen attacker, "Hey, hey—are we going to play a game of hide and seek or a game of catch?"

The sarcastic priest waved his hand. With a snap of his wrist, the stone whizzed over the sand dune and rolled into the quiet, dark forest.

A sharp scream of pain came from between the trees.

When Abel finally looked up, Leon was no longer on the sand dune. The other priest's huge body sprinted like a predator after prey, kicking up sand; he jumped at the small shadow of a person trying to escape into the forest.

"Ow! Crap, let go!"

"It's a kid," Leon said.

The shadowed figure writhed, caught by the scruff of its neck like a feral cat. Leon coughed as if disappointed. It was a boy, not yet ten years old—perhaps a native of this island? His baggy shorts and patched jacket were simple in design, but they had been cleaned carefully.

"Dammit! Let go of me! I said, 'let go!'"

"Are you from this island? Where are your parents? I want to speak to an adult."

"I don't have any parents! There isn't a single adult here," the kid said sullenly.

"Peter!"

Another shadow tumbled out from the trees. It was a girl in her mid-teens; she wore a blue maid's dress and her blonde hair was drawn up in a bun. She looked pale with fear, standing there under the moonlight.

"Peter, you be good." She turned to Leon. "Um, are you a pirate? There's no treasure on this island, but I'll give you food. So, please, let that boy go."

"Oh, dear. You're calling a gentleman like me a pirate?" the priest muttered.

Still holding up the violently struggling boy, Leon smiled. His expression was like that of a jackal upon discovering a goat separated from the herd. He spoke in a tone that he undoubtedly believed to be polite. "Mucho gusto, senorita. I'm Father Leon. I'm a wandering priest from the Vatican. Lying over there — with the whites of his eyes showing — is my companion, Father Abel. On our way to Londinium on official business, we encountered a storm. Sorry to bother you, but won't you let us borrow your radio?"

III

"Would you like tea or coffee?" "If you're going to the trouble, tea. Um, with thirteen sugars, please."

The girl in the maid's dress seemed a little surprised by such an outrageous request; however, she diligently spooned out thirteen sugars. Before long, the teacup was placed on the table, its contents giving off a high-quality aroma.

"Here. Sorry you had to wait," the girl said.

"Well, thank you very much. Mm, it smells good. I look forward to this whenever I take business trips to Albion. After all, there's no place like Albion for tea, yes?"

Sipping the tea—or something like tea, considering its gelatinous state—the spectacled priest seemed satisfied. As if the pain from the wound on the back of his head had vanished, he smiled, seemingly carefree. So carefree, in fact, that he impolitely rested his elbows on the table.

The forest surrounding the hilltop villa was visible from the dining hall window. If it were noon, they could have seen the beach and the watercraft; because it was now the middle of the night, they couldn't see anything. From time to time, they could hear the wind carry the sound of Leon's hammer pounding as he repaired the aircraft.

"I'm sorry, Miss Wendy, for suddenly pushing myself on you, and enjoying your tea on top of it."

"No, I'm sorry: Although you took the trouble to come up here, our radio failed. Perhaps when my master comes back, he'll fix it. Unfortunately, I'm a little bit . . ."

"Well, we'll show your radio to Father Leon later. That old man is

very handy with such things. It's a pity that your master is out. I would have liked to meet the famous Professor James Barrie. He likes children, according to all accounts."

Placing the empty teacup in its saucer, Abel looked around curiously.

The mansion itself was an extremely traditional version of an Albion nobleman's country house. It was filled with plush animals, dolls, toys, cricket bats, and other small articles that children would enjoy. Clumsy crayon pictures were scattered all around. It was quite a spectacle, as though the mansion itself were a child's nursery.

According to Wendy, Barrieland Island originally was uninhabited. Years ago, Barrie had developed the land. When he'd moved here to retire, he'd brought along a few orphans. These toys belonged to those children.

"When did I read in the newspaper that he'd gotten a medal from Her Majesty the Queen for his research on aging? A doctor and a fairytale author—moreover, a man of character who loves children ... Well, maybe there are people like God here on Earth."

"People like God?" The girl stiffened slightly as she poured a second cup of tea, but Abel didn't seem to notice.

"Well, isn't he? Some parents sell off their own children or take in total strangers to raise them only for they money. . . . He seems to take care of strangers' children without seeking any reward."

Wendy murmured, "Yes, in a way, maybe he is God. Well, at least, he was like God to me."

"Huh?"

Abel narrowed his eyes as the second cup of tea met his mouth. It wasn't because her dark tone had startled him, but because he suddenly wanted to sleep. The long flight had made him strangely tired.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what it sounds like: I'm a child who was picked up by Teacher—I mean, my master—as if picked up by the hand of God."

"Indeed. You're his daughter, as it were?"

"Daughter? No. If I dare call myself anything, maybe I'm his guinea pig. I'm not his daughter."

"Guinea pig"—that's another disquieting expression. Abel wanted to comfort her; but because he felt sleepy, he couldn't think of suitable words. Trying to clear his head, he took another sip of tea.

"Miss Wendy, I think—"

"Rather than talk about me, Father, I wanted to ask about you," Wendy said. In all this time, she still hadn't put one finger on the teacup before her. And the way she spoke now, there was no vestige of the meek maid Abel had met before. She questioned Abel in a tone a queen might use: "Father, where did you come from?"

"Rome. Vatican City's Foreign Affairs—a special detachment from AX . . ."

Huh, what am I saying? Although his body was heavy, his tongue felt strangely light. Abel shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. He sipped more tea, but its sweet taste became stale, blanketing his consciousness.

"Yes, it's fine if you drink more. Isn't my tea delicious?"

A dim idea came to him, warning him there was something in the tea.

He quickly clenched his fists. He was trying to wake up by causing himself pain, but Wendy's dainty fingers prevented that.

"Don't think of doing anything uncalled for, Father." As she softly grasped the priest's hands, Wendy put her mouth to his ear. "Please, concentrate on my questions. What is AX?"

"Miss Wendy, it's no use—"

"Answer my question: What is AX?"

"A special detachment of Vatican City's Foreign Affairs. Vampire incidents . . . investigation . . . enforcing of laws . . ." The priest coughed painfully.

Looking down at him with a cold light in her eyes, the girl nodded. "That airplane crash before wasn't a coincidence, was it? Why did you come to this island?"

"Michael Darling . . . child kidnapping syndicate . . . list. Professor Barrie . . . Professor Barrie? Where is Professor Barrie?"

"Heh, I'm amazed you're still conscious, despite the fact that you've had enough of the drug to make an elephant keel over." Wendy sighed, as if impressed. She gently wiped away the beads of sweat forming on Abel's face. "Father, did you come to look for my master? If so, I'm very sorry. As I told you a little while ago, he isn't here. That's the truth. There isn't one adult here."

"What do you mean?"

The kitchen doors clacked open. Countless children's faces peeked in: large children, thin children, boys and girls. They had different features and physical builds, but all of them were staring at Abel with expressionless eyes.

"Missing? Then, this island . . ."

"This is Barrieland." As the priest's eyes began to close, Wendy whispered kindly, "We're an island of children."

"Let's see, connecting the vaporizer over there, tightening this bolt like this . . . Good, how's this?"

The propeller began to turn, faster and faster, until wind rippled the

surface of the water. Leon looked up in satisfaction at the plane he'd restored to life.

"Ha, easy. Well, next is the radio." He sighed. "Hey, kid, how long are you going to cower like that?" The giant priest turned around to stare mercilessly at Peter, who was sitting on the beach, hugging his legs. "If you're going to cry, go do it somewhere else. You're a pain in the neck."

"I couldn't protect Wendy." Peter's face wasn't clearly visible in the dark, but Leon could hear the boy's sniveling well enough.

"Although I promised Wendy I'd protect her, I was beaten by an old man."

"Ah, don't cry about everything! And who's an old man?" Taking the radio out of the plane, Leon shouted, "As you can see, I'm not yet thirty! It's unreasonable for me to be called an old man. So, what's your problem? Are you mad because you were beaten? You're an idiot. Did you think children could win against an adult?"

"We can't win?"

"You can't win. Children can't beat an adult. That's a fact."

"A fact?"

"Yeah, a fact." Looking down at the charred radio, Leon sighed again. "Oh, no. This is no good." He'd have more hope sending up a distress flare than trying to fix this. "Hey, kid? You remember my companion, the one with the ugly glasses? Go and call him for me."

"The priest with glasses? All right."

"Ah, wait a minute." Leon held out his thick hand, grimacing exaggeratedly. "That rock you threw at me a little while ago? It was very painful when I caught it. There's hope for you, although you're just a kid."

"Really? Can I become as strong as you?"

"Well, maybe you can become almost as strong as me."

Peter's face burst into a smile. "Because I'm a failure, I thought I couldn't become strong. I see now: When I become an adult, I can be a success! Thanks, old man!"

"Failure? Success?" Leon questioned those strange words as the boy ran toward the hill. "Hey, wait a minute! That word . . . 'failure,' you said... Oh, he's gone already."

After he watched the child disappear beyond the faraway trees, Leon scratched his head. "This is why I hate kids. They're a nuisance. And just what is that oaf of a priest doing, anyway? If he's being treated to tea, I'll castrate him."

"Found him. Found him, found him. Found him here."

Tightening his hold on the skeleton of the radio, Leon suddenly stopped wading through the shallows. His twinkling eyes carefully surveyed his environment, looking for the source of the strange voice.

"Boy?"

"No, no, we're not boys."

The snickering voices belonged to several children, but he couldn't tell where they were. It almost felt like they were whispering directly into his ear. The next instant, he thought they were standing somewhere beyond the forest. It was like they were everywhere.

"Where are you looking? We're here!"

"Whoa!" Turning around, Leon threw back his head. Suddenly, his aircraft began to skim the water's surface.

"Ha ha ha!"

There was no time to run. He had no time to wonder about when the plane's anchoring ropes had been severed. The huge craft towered over the priest. He heard the dull sound of something breaking. Black air bubbles rose from the ocean's surface. He went under, crushed.

"Did we kill him?"

"We killed him! We killed him!"

"Sheesh, I wanted to drive. . . ."

Three girls peeked out of the pilot's window. Each child held a cutlass or short spear. They wore striped sailor suits and had put on eye patches and fake beards.

"Well, that was easy."

"He's an adult. No big deal. Before this, somehow, well . . ."

"Come on, let's pull up his dead body. If sharks come, it'll be a bother."

As they carried on such a disgusting conversation in innocent, childlike tones, the three "pirates" lightly leapt down from the cockpit. As soon as they crossed the shallows, they searched in the area where they'd seen the corpse sink.

"Well? Is he dead, Curly?"

"Wait, it's strange. There's no smell of blood." Curly, the girl acting as leader, snorted suspiciously. Her sense of smell—which rivaled that of a great white shark—caught only the scents of the seashore and something metallic.

"Hey, look at this!"

The radio was broken in two. If that was rolling around here, then . . .

"Let's go, ladies. Want a game of tag?" bellowed a fearless voice. The priest, his long black hair buffeted by the sea breeze, was grinning from his perch atop a rock. "Sounds like fun. Can I join in your games, too? Ring toss is my specialty."

With a sneer, Leon let the jingling bracelets on his wrists slip down to his fingers. The ultra-thin silver blades—composed of a molecular silver-deposition coating on single-crystal ceramic—

clinked softly as they slipped out.

Abruptly, a violent change occurred in the children. As they gave off low growls, long teeth protruded from their torn lips. On the backs of their coats, which now noisily split open, transparent wings began to flutter.

Leon smirked.

"You've saved me the trouble of looking around for you, fairies!" A sharp hum overlapped the priest's voice as he twirled the chakram on his fingers.



One of the fairies who'd taken the form of human girls suddenly disappeared. The next instant, a silhouette hovered over Leon's head. The descending shadow carried a spear.

"Got you!"

A sharp sound rang out. The spear gouged into the boulder; breaking it apart. The scattered stone's fragments splashed in the water. The priest, who'd been standing on the large rock until half a second ago, was no longer there. Rounding his body like a pouncing cat, Leon landed in the shallows thirty feet away.

"Sheesh, I missed!" The girl glared at her prey.

One of the other children shouted in a high-pitched voice: "Curly, be careful!"

The warning was barely in time.

"Kyah!" Leon cried.

The chakram wriggled, rotating around Curly's short spear; it grazed Curly's cheek before dancing up toward the night sky. Curly tossed back her head, watching as the ring gracefully returned to its owner's fingertips.

"Are you okay, Curly?"

"I-I'm okay. Be careful! This is no ordinary adult!"

The priest was as skillful as a demon. The instant he crossed paths with Curly, not only did he evade her spear's downward thrust, but he put the chakram into orbit around it!

"How dare you? I won't forgive you, you damned adult!"

"Uh huh. What are you going to do, you crappy little kids?" Twirling the chakram on his fingertip, Leon laughed. He sported the nastiest possible expression—using his anger to hide the fact that a cold sweat was soaking his back. These guys are fast!

Even Leon's reflexes, which clearly exceeded those of a normal man, were hard-pressed every time he had to dodge.

He'd managed to survive so far because he faced one opponent; if all three fairies attacked together, he wouldn't be able to avoid injury.

"Uh oh. I don't want to use that yet, you know?" Curly muttered.

The fairies hovered, glaring at Leon.

The priest focused his attention on the white smoke that now crossed his field of vision. "What is this fog?"

Directly below the fairies, the ocean surface rippled with violent energy. There was no heat source, but the water was boiling.

"Could it be? Oh, no, this is..." Fogging phenomenon.

The ocean water, demolished into an inter-molecular combination of high-frequency waves, began to change into steam, despite staying at normal temperature. That was a characteristic of fairies: producing supersonic waves by vibrating their thin wings at high speed.

"Die!" Curly screamed.

It was already too late by the time Leon dodged. Their high-pitched voices harmonized, forming a sonic blade that split the ocean's surface—and headed straight for the priest.

IV

"Huh. . . Where am I?" It smelled like a hospital. Abel woke up in a pure white room laced with the scents of rubbing alcohol and ether. When he tried to sit up and shake his groggy head, he failed. His hands and feet were tied firmly to the bed.

"Strange. Why am I in a place like this?"

His memory cut off after the unpleasant scene in the dining hall where he'd drank Wendy's tea. In this illuminated room, medicine, rusty scalpels, and other surgical equipment lined the shelves. Mysterious shapes loomed on the edge of his vision.

"Ah, you there! This is ... Eek!" He called out to the shapes waiting in the darkness, but his strained vocal chords made his voice sound hollow.

The silhouettes were of dozens of children—they'd been pickled in formaldehyde and stored inside huge glass bottles. Their bodies weren't normal. They had large surgical scars carved into their bellies and shoulders; small wings sprouted on their backs. Weirdly distorted horns pierced the back of their heads. Sometimes, third eyes peeked out from protruding lumps on their foreheads.

"Wh-what is the world are these? In the first place, this is—ah, oh no!"

Hinges creaked. Abel hurriedly ducked his head. The sound of footsteps moved steadily toward the operating table. Light reflected on a sharp scalpel, grasped by a stranger.

"Old man, are you awake?" The whisper came from a young boy. "Old man, this is no time to sleep. Hurry and wake up!"

Abel quit pretending to be asleep and opened his eyes. "Uh, who are you?"

"Ah, you're awake." The boy sighed in relief as he looked down at Abel's face. "I'm Peter. There's no time. Come with me."

"Huh?"

Peter's voice sounded harsh as he cut Abel's restraints: "Come on, get up quickly! If you don't, we'll be caught!"

Abel wondered if this was another trap. "Who in the world are you?"

"I'll explain later. First, we have to get to the flying machine. Oh, this is yours, isn't it? You dropped it over there." He thrust a handgun into the priest's pocket, and then he forcibly took Abel's hand. He was impatient for the priest to stand up. Seconds later, he led Abel out of the room and into a dark corridor. "This way! This is the road to the beach."

"Road, you say? Wah, amazing! Is this a tunnel? Are we in a military base? No, it's more than that." Abel sighed, looking up at the tunnel's high ceiling. He didn't know how far down this passage was, but clearly it was built with an extraordinary amount of money and effort.

"Who on Earth made a thing like this?"

"Teacher. He made everything—both the school above and this place."

"Teacher? Professor Barrie? Which means the children in that operating room..?"

"Failures. Ones who couldn't convert, like I could," Peter spat out, trudging ahead. His voice—which overflowed with resentment, hostility, and fear—shook faintly. "They're children that Teacher and the other adults did horrible things to: They were given blood transfusions and had strange things planted in their bellies and backs. If Wendy hadn't chased the adults off this island, I might have been stuck in one of those bottles, too."

"Chased off? You mean you chased off Professor Barrie?"

"Yeah, about two weeks ago, during the Tinker Bell experiment.

"Tinker Bell? Experiment?" Abel was so confused. The boy's explanations didn't make any sense, but Abel could guess that something alarming had happened on this island: a rebellion of the experimental subjects, most likely. That was why there were no adults on this island.

Two weeks ago—right after the syndicate's hideout was blown up. So, the one currently controlling this island is . . .

The tunnel's exit was marked by a thick iron door. Luckily, it didn't seem to be locked. The door creaked as it opened. The forest, showered in moonlight, was silent.

Peter carefully looked at their surroundings; there was no sign of anybody. "This way, old man! Hurry!"

"I-I'm coming. Peter, where is the professor?"

"I don't know. We killed most of his assistants, but he got away in an airplane, so ..."

"Hm- Hey, wait a minute? You're Wendy's friend, right? So, why are you letting me escape?"

"I want to go outside." The boy, who'd been walking quickly, suddenly stopped. When he turned around, he looked up at the priest with imploring eyes. "I want to go to the outside world; you'll take me with you. We can go outside in that flying machine, right?"

"Yes. But . . . why? Why do you want to go outside?"

"To become an adult."

"Hull?" Abel found Peter's unexpected answer bewildering. He repeated his question to the serious-looking boy: "Why become an adult?"

"So I can become strong, of course." There was no shred of doubt in Peter's expression—as if this logic should be obvious. "Teacher did horrible things to everybody and said a lot of mean words—

especially to Wendy; she'd cry from being tormented every day. So, everybody hates adults. They say we'll be tormented again if adults come here. Still, I want to become an adult. However, I love Wendy, so when I become an adult, I won't torment her at all. If a failure like me can become an adult, I can grow strong and protect Wendy, right?"

"Well, um, that is ... that's ...»Abel was at a loss for words. Peter was such an earnest child; he'd believe anything Abel said at that point.

"What are you doing, Peter?" a voice asked.

"Wendy!"

The girl with flowing blonde hair was gazing at the two of them with her sparkling blue eyes. She wasn't alone. Behind her, more than twenty small figures were submerged in the darkness.

Oh, dear. Cold beads of sweat rolled down Abel's temples. Are all these children fairies?

Although they were technically vampires, a fairy's battle strength wasn't that great. Abel should be able to handle a fairy, one on one. Regrettably, there were too many of them for Abel now.

"All these opponents against me? You thought so highly of my skills ..." he joked.

Wendy's expression, which had been as hard as an ice sculpture, suddenly softened. With a smile like the budding of a winter rose, she walked toward Peter. There was no time for Abel to stop the boy from going toward her. He tottered over to her, and she encircled him in her arms.

"Thank you, Peter. I'm very happy. I like you. I like you very much. But—"

"No!" Abel stretched out his hand, but it was already too late. A dull sound rang out between the two embracing figures.

"Peter, I'm tired of you."

"Ah!" A flat-sounding gasp leaked out of Peter's mouth. His expression was full of disbelief as he fell to his knees like a broken doll.

"Peter!" By the time Abel scooped Peter into his arms, the boy's body was twitching in pain. Wendy had stabbed him in the stomach with a dagger.

"Goodbye, Peter. We could have been friends forever, if you hadn't gotten the idea that you wanted to become an adult." Wendy's head drooped with sadness. "This is Never Land, the eternal island. As long as you're here, there's no need to worry about hunger or thirst — or about becoming a hateful adult. I wonder why he thought he wanted to grow up? If he'd been a child forever, I —»

A trembling voice interrupted her soliloquy: "Child? No, he was a splendid adult. Unlike you, he didn't run away from his responsibilities. He would have made a splendid man. I won't let you belittle him."

"That reminds me: You're still here — the priest that loves to use flowery words." Wendy turned her scornful gaze to Abel, who now stood. Her expression was pure evil. "It's been a long time since I tasted human blood. All we've had lately is cow or chicken blood."

The sound of soft materials sliding together echoed through the forest. Thin wings extended from Wendy's back, spreading in the night air. The shadows of the other children also shifted; one after another, they morphed into the distinct shape of the night race.

Sharp fangs burst out of Wendy's small lips. The "Queen of the Fairies" laughed.

"Forgive me, Father. I feel sorry for you, but I can't let an adult who's learned the secret of Never Land return to the outside world!"

The flapping sound of insects' wings grew louder. The terrible children rushed at the tall priest's unguarded back like the winds of a hurricane. Despite their speed, Abel's body vanished before they could make contact.

"Eh?"

The instant before they collided, the priest's figure was gone.

"He disappeared. That's crazy!"

As Wendy's gaze quickly roamed in search of her target, six gunshots rang out. Three children, wings gouged with silver bullets, fell to the ground, raising up a cloud of dust. They screamed half a second later.

"What?" Wendy cried.

"This cruel fairytale is at an end, Wendy."

Above the beach trees' branches, a shape soared in the moonlight. Blue eyes, like a frosted lake in wintertime, looked down with pity at the three fallen children, who were agonized by the silver bullets—a toxin fatal to vampires. Gun smoke, white as a fang, rose from the barrel of the percussion revolver grasped in the priest's right hand.

No one had seen him jump. Moreover, his superior speed allowed him to evade the fairies; simultaneously, he accurately fired six bullets in one second.

"Who are you?"

"I'm the wandering priest, Abel Nightroad." He waved his hand sharply, and an empty cylinder fell from the gun. It rolled over the sand, trailing a line of thin white smoke. A millisecond later, he loaded a fresh magazine with new bullets.

"My name is also AX Agent Crusnik. Wendy, I'm arresting you all for murder, as well as suspicion of piracy. Please, throw down your weapons and surrender."

"What do you mean 'arrest,' you damned adult?"

With shrill screams, two shadows zoomed at Abel, scattering dust. A large boy and a thin girl simultaneously kicked off the ground. There was no time for Wendy to stop them. They attacked the priest

from the front and behind with exquisite timing.

"It's no use," Abel said.

The priest's right hand flipped backward, moving as if it were a separate creature. He shot two bullets into the skinny child's shoulders. The gun muzzle (which now faced front due to the force of the recoil) fired rapidly, blasting the charging boy's wings into pathetic honeycombs.

"Ugh. Curly, use the secret weapon! Gather 'round, everyone!" Wendy gave her orders before the two most recent victims finished falling to the ground. I can't believe we're forced to use our trump card on a single person—but if we're careless, Never Land will be destroyed!

Meanwhile, Abel called to the girl, who was grinding her teeth. "Wendy, I'm begging you, please surrender! I don't want to harm a lady."

"You don't want to harm me? Kind, aren't you, Father? Your worries are needless!"

As her widely spread wings transmitted a silent command, Wendy sneered. In an instant, her wings' standby signal would come back as a vibration that humans couldn't hear.

The priest's gun muzzle slithered to the side like a poisonous snake. It was aimed at Curly, who was hovering close by.

Wendy didn't hesitate. "System Tinker Bell, start!"

"What?" An astonished cry tore from the priest's throat. The bullet that the priest had aimed at Curly's wings went astray, breaking a pine tree instead.

The priest, who narrowly avoided the flash of Curly's sharp claws, aimed his gun muzzle again. His target this time was Wendy herself.

No, wrong! Wendy thought. "He dodged! That's impossible."

However, the instant Abel tried to pull the trigger—

"Ugh!" The priest reeled, holding his shoulder. He'd been stabbed by a dagger. Next, a rock flew at him. Swaying, he managed to dodge it.

Almost as if his opponents were expecting him to do that, a different fairy charged forward.

Abel quickly tried to raise his gun barrel, but a fierce pain shot through his foot: A fairy's claws had gouged his flesh. Involuntarily dropping his handgun, Abel lost his balance. He was tackled hard, falling head first onto the beach.

"Heh heh heh. What's the matter, Father?" Wendy smiled gently at Abel.

The priest barely managed to push himself up; he was being struck fiercely from behind. Around him, the fairies were hovering, moving in a single, unbroken line — like bees protecting their queen. No, they were one machine. They made an exceptionally precise machine.

"Idiot, this kind of synchronized attack is . . ." Abel muttered.

"We can do better, too." Wendy looked up at the school belfry on the hill. Its bell rang. She narrowed her eyes, using her wings to transmit a sound wave that humans couldn't hear.

The Tinker Bell System. This lost technology, built before the Armageddon, was a tactical control system in "master and slave" form. The master chip was embedded in Wendy, who was the control unit, and it transmitted her thoughts to the school. The school's computer transformed her signals into a particular low-frequency wave, sending it to the slave chips inside the fairies. Each slave chip controlled the fairies' thoughts and senses; because of this, the group changed into a single hive-mind colony. They were controlled by Wendy's thoughts.

"That's it now, everyone by me. Do like me!"

As the fairies simultaneously increased their wings' rotation speed — fluttering in perfect unison down to the microsecond — an

unusually high-frequency wave was produced. The water molecules in the air bent. The water-wind changed to a white tornado, which struck the priest as he was trying to stand up.

"Ugh!"

"Don't worry, Father. It'll all be over soon."

As Abel shielded his face from the blade of atmospheric pressure, Wendy foretold his death: "Come, I'll blow you apart without leaving a trace!"

"Blow you apart"? That's my line." A thick, sarcastic voice reached Wendy's ears—followed by an explosion.

"What?" Wendy turned back toward the hill and watched as the belfry lit up. In the middle of those golden flames, the building collapsed pitifully.

"The school!"

Backlit by the flames, a huge man's shadow stood at full height. "I don't know anything about Tinker Bell, but don't underestimate adults, you crappy little kids!"

The girl's eyes opened wide at the demonic sight. "You should be dead!"

The black-haired priest laughed fearlessly. "It takes more than that to destroy me. I merely was killing a little time, waiting for my companion." Leon turned the tip of something he held in his hand toward the hill. The spindle-shaped object resembled a flare gun used to send rescue signals, but its appearance was more rugged. It was extremely misshapen, as if a trigger and simple sight-guide had been slapped onto a thick iron pipe.

"This rocket launcher originally was designed for fighting tanks, but it can blow apart bunkers, too. Just watch!"

"No!"

There was no time to stop him. A dull firing sound rang out and

terrible smoke burst from the rocket launcher. A plastic explosive warhead fired at incredible speed, shooting a band of golden light toward the belfry on the hill.

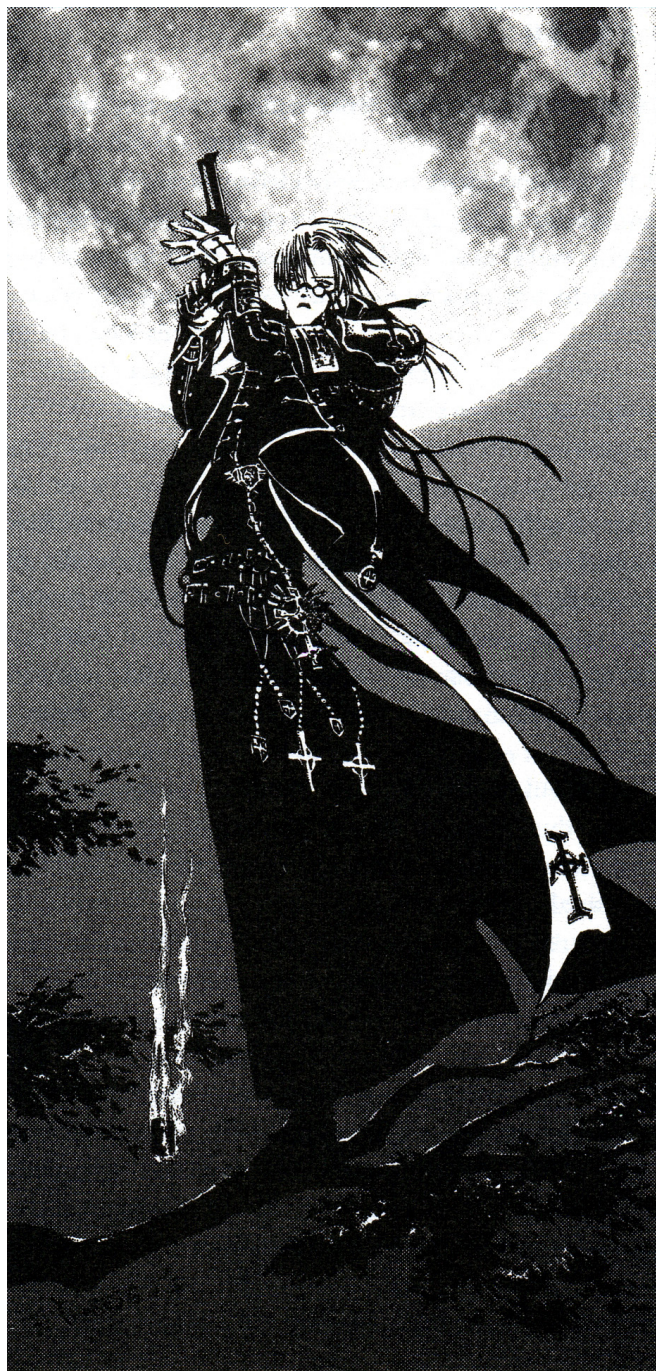
What happened next pierced the fairies' small bodies, as if thunder had displaced pockets of night air. Flames blew apart the belfry; at the same time, the fairies protecting Wendy all fell to the ground.

"Tinker Bell!" Wendy cried.

"Hey, I took care of one nuisance! How long are you going to goof off, Crusnik?" Leon yelled over his shoulder.

Wendy turned around. No, she tried to turn around.

"I'm really sorry, Wendy," said a very sad voice, followed by the sound of a gunshot.



V

"This is why I hate jobs involving kids; they're all kinds of trouble." Seated cross-legged on the beach, the black-haired priest lit a cigarette. Blowing smoke out of his nostrils, he turned around in annoyance. "Well, how is that kid? Is he dead?"

Taking Peter's pulse, Abel sighed. "He's okay. He's just unconscious." Around him, the fairies lay in heaps, also unconscious.

What should they do about them? Wait for dawn? Hand them over to the Vatican or Albion authorities? The man who had forced this monstrous fate on these children was already long gone. Who should take responsibility?

Leon stared at his companion's tired face. When he stood up, he wiped off his rear and suggested in a displeased tone, "I want to get out of here. However, we have to take care of some business first."

"Business? Are you saying there's something left to do?"

"There is—hey, get away from there. It's dangerous."

"What?" Abel twitched as he looked at the huge gun barrel.

Leon's pistol still was pointed at Wendy's blood-smeared face, which rested beneath Abel's right leg. "Move. I'm blowing her away."

"What are you saying? This girl—"

"That girl is a criminal. How many people did she kill? How many ships did she sink?"

Leon's typically jovial expression disappeared as if it had been erased permanently. He forcefully declared his intentions as if he hoped to grind each word into Abel's face: "Have you forgotten our duty? We must destroy the vampires on this island — or arrest them

and take them back."

"That's right! So, we'll arrest them."

"Take them to Rome? Nine times out often, that would be crueler. They're valuable samples of artificial conversion. Unable to die, they'll be subjects of human experiments for centuries."

Abel's tightly pursed lips turned white. What Leon suggested was a distinct possibility. Certainly, allowing that to happen would be choosing a fate worse than death for these children.

"Well . . . what about letting them escape far away . . . ?" "Criminals who have killed dozens of people? Abel, I also sympathize with this girl's bad luck. Think about it, though — can you conveniently forget about the people who made her and what they made her capable of?"

"She's still a child!"

"There are things for which even children can't be forgiven. If we overlook what she's done here, she'll do the same thing again someplace else. Will you take responsibility then?"

Abel was at a loss for words. What his companion said was right. In a way, Leon was showing his own kind of compassion toward this unlucky girl.

"If you think it's terrible, pray for this girl. We agents are allowed to pray. We are not allowed to pity." He put his finger on the trigger.

Abel stood before Leon, trying to shield Wendy from the bullet Leon was aiming at her head. Leon forcibly pushed him away.

"Stop." A faint voice ceased the giant priest's movements. "Stop. Don't kin Wendy." Peter covered Wendy with his broken body. Weakly, he lifted his head. After everything, he still was trying to protect her.

"Out of the way, kid. Do you want to be shot together?"

"Old man, don't kill Wendy. Wendy is kind. She didn't tease me, a

failure. . . . She was nice . . . especially to failures."

"Kid, that girl attacked a number of boats and killed dozens of people. We can't forgive her."

"It was for the experiments. The attacks all were ordered by Teacher," Peter insisted. "He said it was a test of her battle strength. After we chased away Teacher, Wendy didn't kill anybody!"

That sounded suspicious, considering Wendy's undeniably malicious actions in trying to eliminate Abel and Leon. Yet, Peter's explanation held a note of desperate truth.

"You're going to kill Wendy because she was commanded to kill people? Father, Wendy didn't really want to do it."

"Don't interfere, Peter," Leon said.

A small female voice interrupted Leon's protest. "Yes, don't interfere. It's like he says. I shouldn't be alive."

"Wendy!"

The fairy — who had lost her wings by that point — opened her eyes slightly. She hadn't recovered enough to stand up, but her consciousness had returned. She continued speaking in a weak but clear voice: "It doesn't matter. Nothing you say will make any difference with the priests, either. Their work can't be stopped by one grand speech." She looked at Leon. "Go on. Please, kill me right away."

"Wh-what are you saying, Wendy?" Shocked, Peter clung to her. "Why do you have to be killed?" He turned to the priests. "Who gave Wendy this body and made her attack those ships? It was all Teacher and the others! So why?"

"Peter, it's no use any longer." Wendy's eyes were soft, like a doting mother's, as she gazed at Peter. In a voice filled with resignation and fatigue, she spoke, "It's no use. Our time in Never Land is over. The adults won't overlook us being here. If they catch us, it'll be worse than dying. Please understand. That priest is showing me mercy."

"It's not like that!" Peter looked up at the priests, imploring them with his eyes.

Leon muttered a prayer.

Peter said, "You people wouldn't do such a thing, right? You wouldn't do anything terrible to Wendy and the others."

Leon's expression was as blank and emotionless as a statue's. Abel was silent, searching for the right words.

"I understand, Father," Wendy said. "It can't be helped. At least save this boy."

Peter gasped. "No, Wendy! Stop, old man! Don't kill Wendy!" There was strength left somewhere in his wounded body: He clung to Leon's thick arm, shouting at the priest in a blood-curdling voice, "You're an adult! Adults are strong, right, old man? Then, help Wendy! Don't kill her!"

"I'm not an old man! Out of the way, kid!" Leon's thick arm moved, dislodging Peter. He sent the boy flying, and then he pitilessly pulled the trigger. "Dammit, how can I stand to be called old man before the age of thirty?" he roared.

A few blonde hairs danced on the wind.

The huge bullet grazed the girl, who'd involuntarily shut her eyes. She didn't see the bullet strike the ocean's surface and raise a huge spray of water.

"Bah! I'm such a stupid scoundrel! I feel sick!" Leon complained, his angry voice erupting like a volcano. The giant was stamping his feet like a child as he spewed vitriol.

"Ah, Leon?" Abel asked.

"Awww, dammit! This is why I hate talking with kids. God, all right! We'll do something for these crappy kids, somehow! Curse it all!"

With a contemptuous glance at Abel and the others—who couldn't

help but look at each other in confusion—Leon cursed heaven and hell. He called each demon and angel about three hundred bad names; then, at last, he seemed to calm down. He turned around, sporting an extremely displeased expression.

"What are we going to do? If we return, we'll have to make a report. And if we make a report, the police or the army or somebody will come swarming in. Don't you have some idea how to hide the children, Abel?"

"Hm." Abel thought for a while; then, he snapped his fingers—or at least, he tried. He clucked his tongue, glaring at his fingers that had failed to snap. "We still have your connection—we can use that guy for transportation. I know a place neither the Vatican nor Albion can reach. It's a little far, so I'll need your help, Leon."

"Mine?"

"If you just put up the money . . . airplanes and coffins . . ." Abel smiled wickedly at the suspicious glint in his companion's eyes. "I want your contact to supply something."

"I read your report." The most beautiful cardinal in the world, Vatican Foreign Affairs Minister Caterina Sforza, thanked the subordinates who stood before her desk. "It seems you finished your assignment without a hitch. Thank you both for all your hard work."

"It's an honor to receive your praise!" said Leon, standing at attention. He had combed his hair—quite unusual behavior for him. He also had shaved his whiskers, and his neatly pressed collar actually looked appropriate for someone working for the Vatican.

Next to him, Abel nodded vigorously. "We assaulted the hideout of the Albion professor James Barrie, who was conducting his pirate

activities from a stronghold on Never Land Island. Although Barrie got away —"

"All the vampires were destroyed, right?" the cardinal asked.

"Yes!"

"Very good, just as I expected of you." She paused. "Ah, yes, that's right — now that I think about it, there's one thing I wanted to confirm, if you don't mind?"

"Yes?"

The two priests looked stiff, as if they were being interrogated while strapped to one of San Angelo's electric chairs.

By the window, the early spring sunlight gently shone in. The cathedral plaza below bustled with pilgrims from far away and church attendants walking about. It was a pleasant morning, but the priests' expressions were like those of mountain climbers stranded on a snowy cliff.

Leon asked, "When you say 'confirm' —"

"— what could you mean?" Abel wondered.

Caterina smiled. "You needn't be so tense. It's a very trivial thing. Sister Kate, are you there?"

"Yes, Your Eminence."

Caterina casually asked the holographic nun that appeared at the center of her desk: "A strange receipt appeared in the expense account, didn't it? Someone chartered a whole freighter to go to • the Empire. What was that about, gentlemen?"

"Well, what was that about, Abel?" Leon asked innocently.

Abel choked. "Uh, I'm bad with money. When I see an amount of money higher than three figures, I get a fever. . . ."

Caterina silently listened to her flustered subordinates as they

bickered. At length, she quietly nodded. "Fine. Based on the nature of AX, there are often obscure expenses."

"Of course there are! Just so, Your Eminence. You understand," Leon said smoothly.

Abel looked relieved. "Yes, yes. That's right. Well, we have a wise superior. Yes, yes."

The two priests nodded their heads.

Gazing kindly through her monocle at their strained faces, the cardinal pushed a piece of paper across his desk. "However, as there's no explanation for this receipt, I can't approve the expenditure. Payment will be taken out of your personal accounts. Sister Kate, send them both an invoice later."

"What!" The two agents—the strongest members of the AX—screamed in fear.

"Wh-wh-what shall we do, Leon? I'm probably the poorest priest in the world! I'm opposed to this idea; this huge amount of money—"

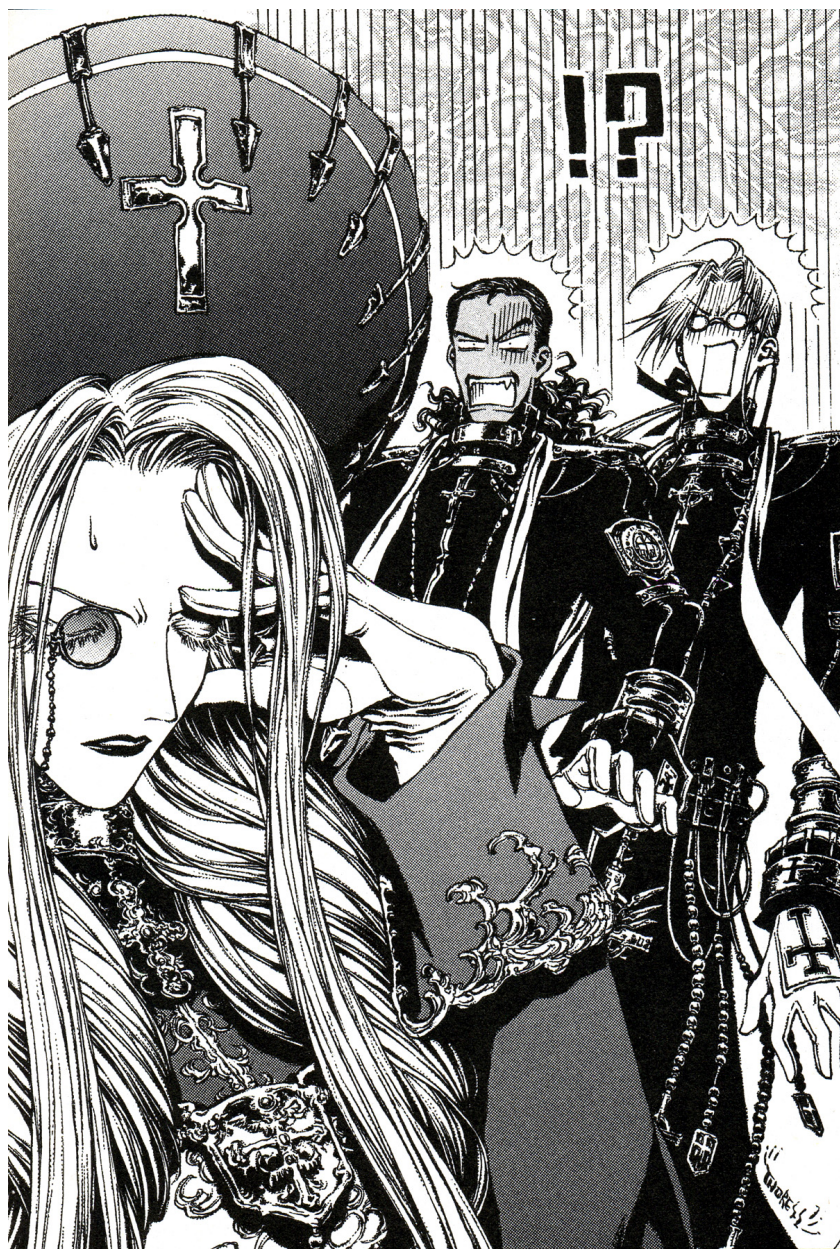
"Never mind that! Aren't you relieved she didn't see through our deception? Didn't you prepare some plausible excuse?"

"Excuse? To Caterina? I wouldn't do such a reckless thing."

"Ah, Your Eminence?" Sister Kate's hologram peered anxiously at her superior's face, which had been carefully blank for some time.

"You don't seem to feel well. Shall I make you some tea?"

"Make it hot, please." Rubbing her aching forehead, the Woman of Steel heaved a rare sigh. "These two... some children never grow up."



Silent Noise

Eyes have they, but they see not.

They have ears, but they hear not.

Psalms 115:5

I

He's been useful for various things, but I can't associate with him anymore. I think I'll sever ties with him," the old man whispered in a hoarse voice.

Here in the Duchy of Catalonia—the only place the international express train from the neighboring countries of Franc and Rome arrived—stood Sants Estacio. Located in the western part of the capital, the train station was packed with travelers hurrying to board the last train.

The old man was one of about ten old people wearing sinister-looking black suits.

"Until the problem's taken care of, I'll leave this city. I'll let you deal with it, Don Biryal. By tomorrow . . . take care of that guy—understand?"

"Please, leave it to me, Master Dominic."

Biryial, the boss of the Barcelona underworld, sneered, twisting up the scar on his cheek. With a crocodile's smile, he jutted out his chin to indicate his subordinates. "These guys are more valiant than the military. I have a lot of men, and our opponent came with only one companion. By tomorrow, he'll be fish bait, floating in the harbor."

"Yes, but he's a man of unknown character—by no means underestimate him. You know where he's staying?"

"We know. There'll be no witnesses there. The police won't come, either. We can kill him as grandly as we please—"

"Wait. That's enough of this talk. Don't let my secretary find out." He paused, turning around. "Well, I've kept you waiting, Noelle."

A young woman standing in front of the VIP ticket counter greeted the amiably smiling old man. "I've been waiting for you, Director."

Her intelligent good looks and smartly tailored suit were suitable for the personal assistant to the director of a large company.

Upon glimpsing a bit of Noelle's shapely leg, Biryial whistled. His tongue was hanging out—but after the old man glared at him, he recovered by pretending to cough.

Noelle said, "As requested, I've reserved the last train to Avignon. It departs in ten minutes, so you'd better go to the platform now."

"As efficient as always. Thank you. Well, Biryial, the other matter is up to you."

"Yes. Take care, Doctor."

As Biryial and his gang bowed, the old man made his way through the ticket booth. A passageway about one hundred fifty feet long led straight to the international platform. Two people in black suits and the beautiful secretary trailed after the old man. They quickly passed through the deserted corridor.

Suddenly, a tall, lanky shadow appeared. "Doctor Jaime Dominic, the director of Dominic Pharmaceuticals?"

The man's unkempt silver-blond hair and round, milk-bottle glasses reflected the faint golden arc lights hanging overhead. The simple cassock and threadbare cape that wrapped around the stranger's body were typical for a wandering priest.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"I'm the wandering priest, Abel Nightroad. Pleased to meet you, Doctor Dominic—or maybe I should call you 'Professor James Barrie'?"

The instant he heard that name, the old man blanched. "I-I don't know what you mean. Never mind that, what is a priest doing here? This platform is just for VIP use."

"I'm an agent dispatched by the Vatican Foreign Affairs— from the special duty office commonly called AX."

The director made a frustrated noise.

His secretary didn't seem to notice. Under a wave of lustrous black hair, her icy eyes shone as she said: "I've come to arrest you on suspicion of murder, kidnapping, and child abuse on Never Land Island. It's no use trying to escape. Please, give up quietly."

"*S-Señora Noelle!* You—"

"Ah, I've been remiss." A cold, witchy smile flashed across her beautiful face. "I'm Sister Noelle of the Saint Mercedes Convent. By order of the Vatican, I've been secretly investigating your company."

"Get them!" the old man cried.

The two guards drew their guns. Barrie slipped right through the gangly priest's extended arms and ran down the corridor with an agility that belied his age.

"What are you gawking at, Abel?" Noelle yelled.

"Sorry!"

The guns pointed toward the priest, who was trailing after Barrie. The bodyguards pulled the triggers with practiced ease. However, the nun's hand moved an instant faster than their bullets.

"Gahhh!" one black-suited man screamed. Bright red liquid burst from his wrist. Wiping away gore stuck on the laser wedged between her fingers, Noelle sorrowfully shook her head. "Have I gotten rusty since my retirement? A half year ago, you'd have been missing your head."

"You bitch!" The other guard switched his aim to Noelle— but his target quickly disappeared from his field of vision. He glanced around.

A slender shadow danced over his head. The sister, who was clinging to the pipes on the ceiling with unbelievable strength,

flashed her beautiful legs. "Barrie's escaping! After him, Abel!"

"Yes!"

She kicked the bodyguard in the jaw; he fell head over heels. Noelle landed on his stomach with a shout.

As Abel hurriedly turned around to look at her, the old man quickly escaped through the door at the end of the corridor.

That leads right to the platform. It'll be bothersome if he escapes into the crowd. Desperately pumping his lanky legs, the priest began to run down the corridor.

He fell clumsily, sliding along the floor, spurting blood from his nose. "Huh?"

"What are you doing?" Noelle cried. "Never mind, I'll go after him! You take care of these guys!"

"No, Noelle!" Abel shouted from where he lay on the floor.

"Be careful!" she said.

"Eh?"

When she tried to take off after Barrie, Noelle's long legs got tangled with Abel's. She lost her balance, falling back onto Abel's face.

Abel wheezed.

"Ow ow ow ow. What is that?" With her backside still on her partner's face, Noelle rubbed her hip. Looking down to see what had tripped her, she frowned in suspicion.

Countless cracks ran through the floor. Moreover, the cracks were faintly vibrating, widening slowly.

"Th-this is . . ."

Then, the very air howled.

A thrumming noise rumbled, vibrating through their bodies, and

something violently shook the corridor. The floor twisted; the windows burst. They could hear the sound of tremors causing pillars to crack. Suddenly, the walls trembled like living things.

"Earthquake?" Noelle murmured.

"Keep your head down! Please, lie flat!"

Chunks of plaster fell on Abel's head as he covered Noelle. If the ceiling comes down, that's the end of this story.

Although it felt as though hours had passed, in reality, the shaking lasted about thirty seconds. Suddenly, the earth tremors became inaudible. The vibrations stopped as quickly as they had started.

"That was a big earthquake."

"It's strange." Noelle's voice was hard as she peeked through a broken window.

The streetlights in the city still were shining, and carriages and automobiles came and went normally. There wasn't a single broken branch among the green trees lining the roads. Passersby were shouting to each other excitedly and pointing at the station.

"It seems like this building was the only one affected," she said.

"That's crazy! If that wasn't an earthquake . . . That's it! Barrie!" Having remembered his duty at last, the priest sprang up. He stumbled over the cracks in the floor as he made his way to the exit.

He pushed open the doors. "Eh?"

His eyes—the color of a winter lake—widened. He froze, staring at the place where the platform should have been.

The last train to Rome should have been there; passengers should have been scurrying to board as family members wished them goodbye. Instead, Abel saw the ruins of a fallen ceiling and a red pool of blood leaking out from a mountain of garbage. It was as silent as a tomb.

Sants Estacio's Platform 3 had been destroyed.

II

From a restaurant's outdoor table situated under the shade of betel palm trees, the view of Barcelona's blue ocean and white beaches was stunning. In the harbor, ships came and went, overflowing with the bounty of the sea. Towering in the old town quarter, which resembled a stony maze, was the Santa Eulalia Cathedral, where the Barcelona bishop's seat was located.

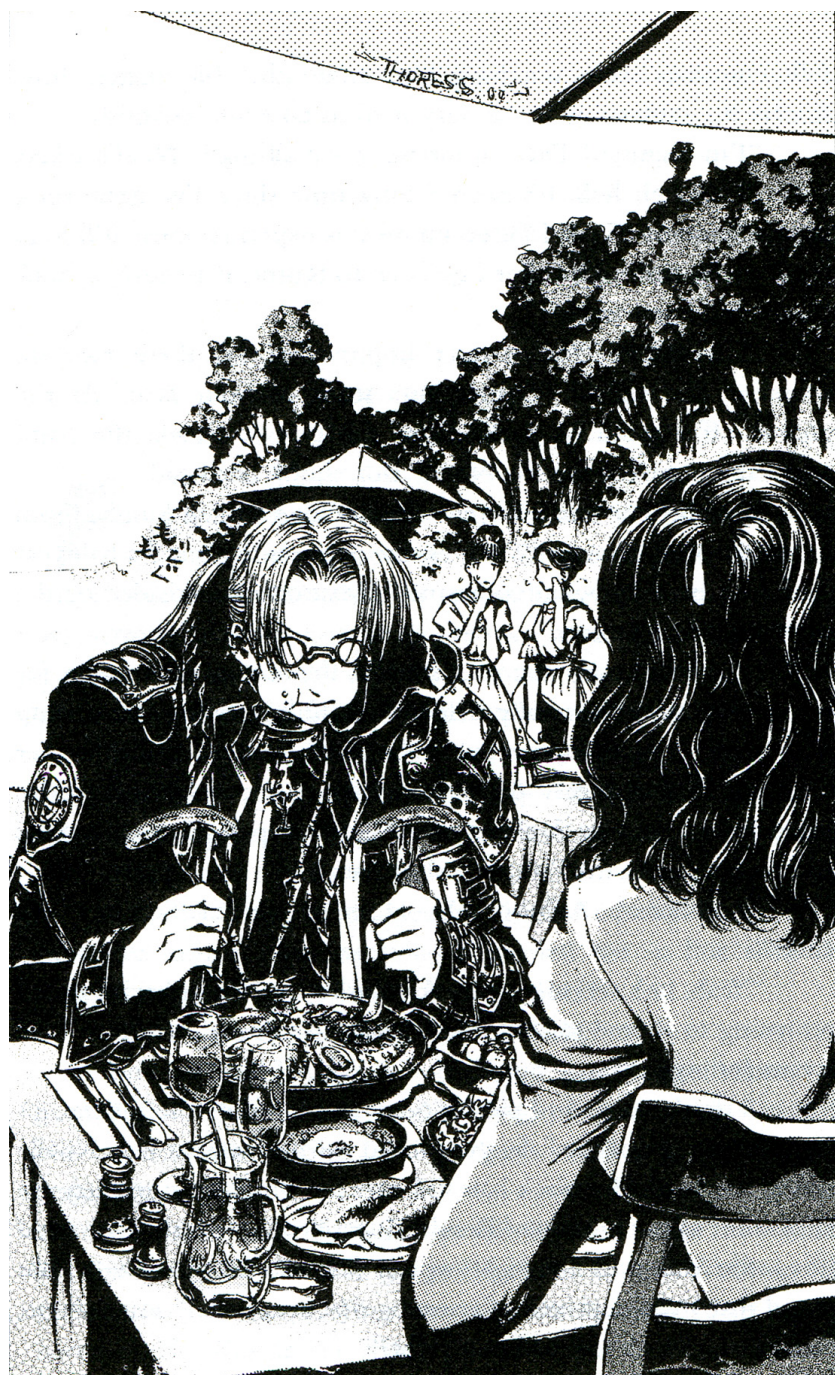
The main street bustled with people talking and shopping. The afternoon was peaceful, especially in that little restaurant situated on top of a small hill; the southern city seemed abundant with activity and slightly exotic.

"So, the police investigation didn't find any traces of an explosive device. They say what happened was in line with the station building's age. Are you listening, Abel?"

"Of course I'm listening, Sister Noelle."

The beautiful woman wearing a pretty suit looked up from a sheaf of reports to see Abel Nightroad nod very seriously. His expression was sober, and his gaze overflowed with sincere enthusiasm.

All the same, he'd stuffed so much paella in his mouth that his cheeks puffed out. He grasped forkfuls of grilled sausages in each hand. In addition, there were five lunch sets lined up on the narrow table. (Inside the shop, the waitresses dressed in colorful folk costumes were watching him anxiously.) No matter how sincere his expression, it was very hard to take him seriously.



"I'm disgusted. Do you intend to eat all that?" Noelle asked.

"Heh heh heh. It's been a long time since I've gone on a proper business trip. If I fatten up on this expensed meal, it'll hold me over for three days after I go back to Rome. If I chew my cud, maybe it'll last a week."

"Cheapskate. You haven't improved a bit these past six months." She sighed. "Something's stuck to your face." As she picked off a grain of paella from the priest's cheek, the Saint Mercedes Convent novice, Noelle Bor, shook her head.

Beneath her knitted eyebrows, her eyes smiled kindly. From her mild expression, it was impossible to guess that until a half year ago, she'd been an agent codenamed 'Mistress' and dreaded by the enemies of the Vatican.

"Ah, thanks. By the way, Noelle, thank you very much for saving me today. You really helped." Skillfully peeling the shrimp simmering in steaming broth, Abel bowed his head to his former comrade. "I felt uneasy partnering with you considering you've retired—but because Archbishop Alfonso's trip to Rome requires so much security, the Vatican is shorthanded."

"Archbishop Alfonso, His Holiness' uncle? So, he's still alive?"

"Yeah, he's serving as the Archbishop of Cologne; now, he's returning to Rome for the first time in five years. Thanks to that, we underlings are very busy."

"I don't mind. As a person once employed by the Vatican, it's my duty to cooperate." As she picked up her cafe au lait, Noelle shook her head. Her black hair slid over her shoulder, spreading the faint scent of her perfume. "Besides, I was bored with the cloistered life; infiltration and investigation was fun, too. Maybe I'm a little vexed that I was deprived of arresting that criminal. Dominic—no, Barrie—he was a real bad guy, right?"

"At this point in time, I've confirmed he's murdered forty-eight people. In any event, he's going to receive the death penalty."

James Barrie, former Londinium University professor, was the ringleader of the Never Land Incident — a large-scale kidnapping and human experimentation program that had come to light two months prior. The incident had been resolved thanks to AX, but Barrie himself already had vanished.

AX had learned that Barrie owned a pharmaceutical company in Barcelona under a fake name, but that information was more than a month old. Because active agents could not be spared at that time, former agent Noelle, who'd retired to Barcelona six months before, infiltrated the Dominic Company. She'd ascertained that Director Dominic was Barrie. The professor had changed his face and name. After all that undercover work, she was vexed that he'd disappeared right before her eyes. All through the night, she'd been regretting it obsessively.

Abel felt the same way. *I wanted to catch the man who irreversibly damaged a great many children.*

He heaved an inaudible sigh and deliberately changed the subject, sporting a sunny expression. "So, how's the rebuilding of the station progressing? I heard the police and fire departments were mobilized. Is it going well?"

"Not yet. At any rate, what with the collapsed ceiling and all, isn't it completely destroyed? It'll take more than a week. Any mistakes and it might take a month."

"How many casualties?"

"There were more than two hundred people on the platform, but they all were wiped out. Will they find Barrie's corpse? I think if he survived, he won't be recognizable."

"I see."

Neither the travelers nor their families anticipated dying in place like that. Two hundred lives, two hundred minds, two hundred . . .

Abel hid his face, grimacing. He noticed Noelle watching him. He covered up his sorrow with a fake, carefree smile. Pushing up his

glasses, he reached for some baked bread. "Delicious! This will do very well. Noelle, will you have some, too?"

"Well, just one slice. Ah, delicious!" She swallowed. "What in the world do you suppose that was, yesterday? For just the train station alone—moreover, solely that platform—to fall apart."

"If it wasn't an earthquake, perhaps it was merely poor construction?" Abel wondered.

"Well, who knows? This kind of accident has happened before. That was the sixth time." Noelle stretched out her hand to pick up a newspaper sitting on a nearby ledge. The whole front page was about the previous night's tragedy. Her slender fingers didn't point to the article that reported the accident with hysterical sensationalism, but to the names of five other demolished structures listed at the bottom of the front page.

Abel said, "That happened to all these? Five incidents in two weeks—no, six if we include last night? Barcelona is an old city, but isn't that a few too many accidents?"

"You think it strange? I think so, as well. So, I've investigated a little already. I found out something interesting." Crossing her slim legs, the former agent planted her elbows on the table. She peered into Abel's face. "Each of these five buildings had some connection to Dominic Pharmaceuticals. They were either a rival company's research lab or the private home of a politician who'd been trying to investigate Dominic Pharmaceuticals. Don't you think it would be strangely coincidental if they were mere accidents?"

"So, these incidents are actually crimes?"

"Maybe." Noelle tilted her head slightly and rested her chin on her laced fingers. She spoke in an angry tone, which was rare for her. "What's the *modus operandi*? There were no traces of explosives, and these incidents weren't earthquakes. Whatever they used to make a single large building collapse . . ."

"And who's the criminal? The prime suspect is Barrie, but he probably died yesterday."

"There lies the problem..."

I heartily agree.

Noelle made one suggestion: "Well, I think I'll show my face at the company. If I try fishing around in the director's office, something might come up."

"Will that be okay?" Abel tilted his head, his expression disapproving. "If Barrie is connected with something strange—"

"If he was responsible, mustn't we expose that? Shouldn't we investigate?" Noelle pressed.

"Yes, well . . ." It was logical. However, Abel still seemed reluctant. "I'll scope out things in the company."

"If you loiter around the building, you'll stand out like a sore thumb," Noelle said. "No matter where I go, no one will have time to bother about me. Rather than have a strange priest wander aimlessly, it's much safer for me to go in as a secretary who knows her way around."

"Yes, but—"

"You're a worrywart, Abel."

She stroked the priest's silver-blond hair. When he involuntarily looked up, his gaze locked on her dark eyes. She smiled, but her gaze seemed a bit lonely.

"You're always worrying about somebody—especially me. You're always carrying other people's baggage and pain in both hands. Despite that, you seldom show your own struggles to anybody. Are you so distrustful of other people?"

"It's not that. I'm not tormented or anything. Whenever I think about difficult things, I get a fever." He tried to smile.

"You lie like that to explain it away. The truth is, you're very worried about the station, aren't you? You're convinced it's not just an accident, but a crime. For example, maybe a terrorist wanted to

eliminate Barrie. And maybe the civilians on that platform were killed because you were pursuing him. That's what you're worried about, isn't it?" Noelle sighed. "It's written all over your face."

Abel pursed his lips and stayed silent.

Noelle smiled again. Her carefree expression was that of an older sister teasing a dull little brother. "I don't think doing that — carrying everything by yourself — is good. Aren't there a great many friends around you? You should have more faith in those people. Caterina and Kate and Tres. Now that I mention it, is that other priest still alive—the one that constantly sexually harasses people?"

"You mean Leon? Yes, he's alive and well in prison."

"He's stubborn, that one. He once tried to fondle my breasts right in the middle of a mission! My only regret during my days on active duty was that I didn't split open his fool head."

Grimacing in annoyance, Noelle glared in the direction of Rome. (Right about then, a certain priest in prison probably was feeling the heat of that glare.)

A bell rang out the hour.

"Oh, no. It's that time already. Well, I'm going now. It's okay. If something happens, I'll contact you at once by radio."

"Ah, wait!" Abel cried.

"Hm, what?" Noelle stood and picked up her handbag.

Abel opened and closed his mouth like a suffocating fish. "Um, thank you, Noelle."

"It's not good to say something so formal and polite. You're a man—can't you say 'leave it to me' in a manly way?"

"Oh, um... leave it to me."

"Yes, well done." Snickering, the sister put a finger to her lips. Then,

she leaned across the table and pressed her finger to Abel's mouth. "Bye, Abel. I'll see you later."

She smiled mischievously at the priest, who was frozen stiff with shock. Noelle turned around, masked herself with the serious expression of a capable career woman, and left the restaurant in a rhythmic, no-nonsense stride.

The priest watched her graceful figure as she disappeared.

"She's a beautiful *fraulein*, isn't she? Is she your lover?"

"Huh?" Abel quickly turned around.

"A woman who embraces passion becomes as strong as bronze' — Balzac. Well, in Barcelona, women are passionate. And beautiful," said a man. He was sitting alone at a table behind Abel, quietly laughing at the priest.

How long has that stranger been there? He looked peculiar. He wore an exquisitely tailored mourning suit. His long black hair hung loose to his waist. He cradled a needle-sharp cigarillo between his fingers. And despite his striking and unusual appearance, Abel had failed to notice him. His face was unfamiliar — he was definitely a stranger — so Abel hurriedly exchanged greetings.

"Um . . . Have we met somewhere?"

"Oh, excuse me. No, this is the first time we've met." The man bowed respectfully, flashing Abel an intelligent smile. "The truth is, your face greatly resembles that of an acquaintance of mine, Father. For that reason, I spoke to you with an overly familiar tone. Please, forgive my rudeness."

"Yeah. Um, are you a tourist?"

"*Nein*, I'm here on business. Actually, I'm building theatrical troupe sets and props. In the near future, I'm going into the entertainment business in Rome. Hoping to check out the state of the sets before the actual performance, I came to this city. In climate and terrain, Barcelona greatly resembles Rome. It's most suitable for a rehearsal."

"Ah, indeed."

The wandering priest's budget couldn't support extravagances like tickets to see plays. Therefore, Abel merely nodded, as he was ignorant about things like rehearsals.

The man showed no sign of noticing Abel's ignorance; he continued talking in a friendly tone: "By the way, about that *fraulein* a little while ago: Her theory about the collapse of the building was entertaining. Although it was rude, I listened in. If it's all right with you, may I use her idea in my troupe's next scenario?"

"Ah, no, she was just talking nonsense. Please, don't mind her," Abel said hastily.

"No, apart from whether it's true, it was an exciting story. I desire to produce it. However, to make the crime theory plausible, I'll have to think of a *modus operandi* that the audience can accept. I mean, to swallow the idea that someone can make any building collapse without using explosives? That's a little . . ." The man flicked away ash from his cigarillo.

Neither food nor drink was on the table before the stranger. He hadn't gotten so much as a menu. And the waitresses hadn't come over at all. It was strange.

"Speaking hypothetically, what would you do to cause that kind of destruction, Father?"

"Let's see ... fire a cannon from the outside of the building?"

"Hm. However, in a crowded city like this, could you precisely fire a cannon at your target?"

"If it were from a high place, like a hill or a mountain."

"That's a good idea. Can you to look at this, Father Nightroad?" The stranger spread a piece of paper on the table. It was a tourist map of Barcelona, the kind sold everywhere in the city. Six star symbols were marked on the map in red ink.

"These are the six accident locations. Barcelona is surrounded by

hills, but all the accident locations are in the center of the city. It would be difficult to aim accurately even if multiple cannons were set up on hills."

Abel glared at the map. The man spoke the truth. "Well, the aiming and firing needn't be done from a hill, right? If it were from another tall building . . ." Abel looked at the "closed district"—any empty corner of Barcelona located below the hills. It formerly had been the center of the city; after the Armageddon, however, no one had bothered to reconstruct it. The unpopulated block of land had been sealed off. Now, as the sun set, the closed district was sinking into darkness.

He could see an unusual building in the center of the district. It was conspicuously huge, with countless spires.

"If it were from there, a criminal could shoot and aim anywhere in the city. Ah, but no shells were found at the accident locations. So, there goes the cannon theory...Wait a moment... how do you know my name?"

When he turned around again, Abel's expression clouded.

Tobacco smoke rose from the ashtray, but the stranger was nowhere to be seen.



III

Placing a sheaf of papers tied together by a black ribbon on the desk, Noelle sank into a cushioned chair.

"Well, shall we begin?" she asked herself.

Luckily, there was no sign of anybody in the director's spacious office. She relaxed her shoulders and closed her eyes, focusing on her power. Instantly, her internal "third eye" opened and a scene unfolded around her. It looked like a photograph negative.

"Now then, where did the director spend most of his energy?"

Here and there in the negative scene, fluorescent lights sparkled. The light turned various colors ranging from blue, which indicated intellectual curiosity, to orange, which showed greed. This room's occupant tainted the bar's liquor bottles a shiny salmon pink with his desire for a drink.

Noelle was able to read living beings' emotions as colors. She also could observe traces of emotion left behind, like infrared imaging. It was a power that had saved her often since she'd become an AX agent.

"A hidden safe ..."

Sure enough, in the corner of the office, underneath a model of the city landscape, stout iron doors appeared. That was a cinch. Noelle delicately inserted two hairpins into the keyhole.

She recalled Abel's worried face as he asked her if she would be all right. He hasn't changed at all, has he?

Although he earnestly worried about people, he positively avoided letting others worry about him, as if convinced he wasn't worth caring about.

When she'd been on active duty, there were many occasions in which she'd wanted to support him. She'd believed she wanted to be by his side forever. However, a dark shadow always hovered around Abel, and so she'd hesitated to express her feelings.

It was as if a pure black darkness always stalked him. He was harboring a dreadful secret. Noelle didn't have the self-confidence to ask him about it, although she loved him all the same. Therefore, Noelle left AX without telling him anything.

The keyhole made a small clicking sound, pulling her bitter thoughts back to the present. The doors opened automatically, revealing the safe's contents: one thick file.

"What is this? Head Office Building Transfer Project Plans." Noelle blinked at the title written on the face of the document. It was a completely normal document about plans to relocate.

"Maybe I missed something?"

Leafing through the file, she lightly clicked her tongue.

The only strange thing she saw involved a building that the Dominic Company had bought for its new headquarters, which previously had been bought and sold by many private enterprises. It certainly was a large purchase, but it wasn't suspicious. Of course, the relocation purchase was a legal transaction.

After Barrie bought the building, why did he have so much remodeling done? This looks just like . . .

After hesitating a moment, Noelle flicked her earpiece. "Hello, Abel, can you hear me?"

IV

That evening's darkness transformed the giant ruin into an otherworldly silhouette.

In the deserted street, which was chilled by the night wind, Abel paused instinctively.

"This is . . ."

Statues of countless saints and angels filled the facade, reminding him of stalagmites in a cave. Above the statues loomed seventeen belfries, complete with eighty-eight bells.

In the center of that cluster of steeples was a central tower. It looked like a rocket from outer space. More than two hundred ten feet tall, the commonly called "Christ's Tower" scowled down upon the city.

The Sagrada Familia Cathedral, with its pagan-looking exterior and overly grand architecture, obviously was built before the Armageddon. Since then, the Vatican had abandoned it. After many rotations in political power between the city of Barcelona and private enterprises who'd planned to make the church into a famous sightseeing attraction, the Sagrada Familia Cathedral was nothing more than a nest for ravens and bats now.

"Dear me, it's amazing. Let's see, however does one get in?"

Abel wandered about, looking for the entrance; he suddenly stopped.

Wheel tracks spread across the gravel. When he looked carefully, he saw a number of military vehicles parked in front of the facade. With their thick bulletproof glass and fortified tires, these automobiles obviously didn't belong to civilians.

"Huh? Previous arrivals?" Abel put his hand to his ear as an electronic sound announced an incoming radio signal.

"Hello, Abel, can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you fine, Noelle. Has something happened?"

"Yes. Can you come here right away? There's something I want you to take a quick look at."

"By 'here,' you mean Dominic's offices, right? Yes, I don't mind, but—huh?"

Abel grimaced as thick liquid drops fell onto his head. Rain? It smelled strangely of blood. How can the Virgin Mary statue on the decorative wall be stained bright red?

"This is . . ."

"What's wrong? What happened?" Noelle asked.

"That's ... now ... from above. Wah!"

Something was falling. It grazed Abel as the priest dodged. The something fell on a car, the windshield of which broke into fragments, scattering among the gravel.

"What! This is—"

Abel gulped when he saw what had bounced on the hood of the car: It was a man wrapped in an ash-gray coat. His blood-smeared face was twisted in fear, and his reddish-black mouth was frozen in a silent scream. Something had pierced his stomach—the corpse's impalement definitely was not due to the impact of his fall.

"Abel? What? What happened?"

"I'll contact you again later!" After cutting off the radio, Abel kicked open the entrance to the church. He drew the percussion revolver bolstered at his hip.

The dim corridor continued through a parabolic arch. The air was

thick with the scents of gunpowder and oil. Brand-new bullet holes gouged the walls. The interior of the deserted building was shrouded in dreadful silence.

It was as if the church had been defiled. Naturally, electricity was unavailable in this abandoned building. However, there were brightly burning lights in the elevator, which opened its lattice doors as if to invite Abel.

"Are you telling me to come up?" he wondered aloud.

Hesitating for about two breaths, Abel stepped into the elevator. As soon as the lattice doors closed, the elevator began to ascend toward heaven. The rest of the church was filled with the darkness of night.

V

The doors chimed open fewer than thirty seconds later; in that scant time, Abel had traveled so high, seventeen of the eighteen steeples were now far below his gaze.

"The central tower is the summit, isn't it?"

Had the corpse been thrown from this height?

The viewing hall on the central tower's highest balcony was constructed in a circular shape, so it was impossible to see the entire horizon. Carefully keeping open a sharp eye, Abel took one step into the hall. Then, he froze.

A large man stood before him.

The stranger had a scar on his cheek. Judging from his combat uniform and saber, Abel thought this man clearly was no ordinary citizen. His attire was strange, but stranger still was the fact such a man was in a place like this.

Don Biryial — the boss of the Barcelona underwork! — floated nine feet above the floor. He didn't seem to notice Abel. Biryial's eyes bulged.

"Help me," he mouthed. His voice was so strained, almost no sound leaked out. His tongue lolled to the side; saliva hung in a string from its pink tip.

"Help." Gagging, Biryial's eyeballs rolled up into his head. His body convulsed violently, as if he were being electrocuted. In the next instant, his hulking frame began to shrink visibly.

He couldn't groan. Biryial deflated like a pierced balloon. His wrinkled skin turned as gray as an old newspaper. His shriveled eyeballs shrunk to the size of beans. They popped out of his eye

sockets and dangled by their optic nerves.

Then, the monster attached to Biryial's mummified corpse floated up into the darkness.

Its colorless, transparent body reminded Abel of a jellyfish. Inside, an umbrella-shaped stomach approximately nine feet in diameter stretched wide with the blood of its prey. Countless tentacles hung from the creature's torso. In the center of its stomach was a beak-shaped mouth. Sharp thorny teeth—teeth which had bitten into Biryial's stomach—trickled blood onto the floor.

"What is this thing?"

"A Sylphide. A *Künstliche Geist* that I built," a lurking shadow answered quietly. "I succeeded in making it invisible most of the time, but I can't call it a complete success, as it shows itself whenever it feeds. *Guten aben*, Father Nightroad."

A chandelier suddenly switched on, illuminating the viewing hall's huge pipe organ—and the figure seated in front of it.

"You! The stranger from lunch!"

"Well, we meet again. Sorry for the mess, but you did respond to my invitation of your own free will."

Under his long black hair, which hung down to his hips, the man Abel had met at the restaurant gave a quiet, inhuman smile.

"The truth is simple: My business partner, James Barrie, unilaterally severed all connections. On top of that, he immediately sent this Biryial fool. It was hard for me to relinquish my control over that old man. Although, in retrospect, he atoned for that with his death."

Abel's confusion had been wiped away; in its stead, a sharp tinge of anxiety arose.

No one else should have known about Barrie's probable death except a few policemen and Noelle. This stranger resembled a dangerous man his superior had warned him about the other day . .

.

The stranger sat quietly, peering at Abel as if reading his thoughts. "You've heard about me from your friend, right? Has Father Tres' arm healed?"

"Rosenkreuz!" Abel aimed his gun between the man's eyebrows. "Please, don't move! Both hands on top of your head! There's an arrest warrant for you on the counts of murder, destruction of public property, and interfering with the performance of sacred duties. I advise you to throw down your weapon and surrender!"

"Isaak Fernand von Kampfer. Rosenkreuz Orden, Level 9-2 Magus, title 'Panzer Mager,' which means 'wizard of machines.' I don't mind if you call me Wizard."

With a sarcastic smile pasted on his face, Wizard held out both his hands. Resigned, he showed no sign of resisting.



Abel didn't take his finger off the trigger. He thought about the monster floating above his head; beyond that, his instincts warned him that this man was dangerous. Alarms rang loudly in his head.

"A little while ago, you said Barrie was your partner? If so, the accident at the station — and the five incidents before that, too — was all that your doing?"

"To say *I* did it wouldn't be accurate. It was Barrie who came to us, requesting we remove the obstacles placed before his company's progress. The Orden and I loaned him our resources and knowledge. This was nothing more than business."

"Terrorism as business? You all commit acts of terrorism for money?"

"Not always for money." Kampfer's voice, abundantly intelligent and soft, sounded agreeable to Abel's ears; however, the man's eyes were as dark as a bottomless pit. Wizard had no emotion whatsoever.

"We of the Order, being dissatisfied with this world, are helping—albeit in a small way—to change the order of things." His tone was ominous.

"We'll speak of that later. I want to know why," Abel said quickly. His heart was pounding. "Why did you summon me here? Why did you drop hints about your crimes?"

"The truth is, Father, I have a little favor to ask of the Vatican. I thought we might be able to make a deal."

"Deal?" What is the terrorist saying?

Gazing amusedly at Abel's furrowed eyebrows, Kampfer continued speaking: "Barrie betrayed us. Well, that in itself means nothing; however, his betrayal meant we've been unable to collect the machinery we'd brought to this city for him."

"Machinery? You mean . . . the dangerous weapon used in those six incidents of terrorism?"

Kampfer nodded. "Yes. It's rather large. We planned to take it out of Barcelona by disguising it as Dominic Company's machinery. However, Barrie... "The man sighed." If it were transported normally, it would be found by the police and destroyed. So, this is where the Vatican comes in. How about it? Won't you help us recover it?"

"That's crazy!" Abel raised his voice without thinking. "Why should we help terrorists?"

"Of course, I'm not saying you'd be giving us your help for free. I'll hand over to you the human experimentation data from Barrie's Never Land Island. The Vatican, which fights vampires, should find the materials valuable enough. It'll make your superiors' mouths water. Don't you think it's a good deal?"

"No, there's a better way." Upon hearing of Never Land Island, Abel's expression hardened. Now, he raised his handgun's barrel. "I'll arrest you, then I'll seize both that data and the dangerous weapon. That's the best option, certainly."

"Oh dear, are you breaking off our negotiations?" Kampfer said, his voice sickeningly sweet.

Abel politely responded, "For now, I'll arrest you. Please, tell me the details about the dangerous weapon later. Is that all right?"

"Oh, if that's what you want, rather than explain it, it'd be faster if I showed you. Here." Kampfer struck his palm on the pipe organ's keyboard and a terrifying echo thundered throughout the church. As his long fingers glided across the keys, he wove a beautiful melody that was somehow laced with evil darkness.

"The prelude and fugue of Bach's 552 Opus. It's suited to this beautiful evening."

Palpable grief reverberated through the otherwise silent night. The low sound of a large bell echoed across the church's surrounding steeples. Suddenly, heavy vibrations made the world tremble.

It feels awful, but it's simply music. What connection could it have

with the incidents of terrorism?

"What does that organ—"

"You'll soon see. Until then, please exercise a little with him." Kampfner nodded.

"Who? Wah!"

Tentacles cut through the air like blasts of wind. Abel instantly ducked, jumping up and to the side; the tentacles swept passed him, gouging a hole in the place where Abel had been standing.

The Sylphide's semitransparent body was stained bright crimson. The gelatinous blob quivered and pulsed, revolving the tentacles that extended underneath it. The whipcord tentacles retreated, as if the beast were pausing to measure the distance to Abel. Next, it attacked its prey from all four sides at once.

"Huh!"

Abel pulled the trigger of his gun several times. The bullets blew off the creature's fangs and ripped into its six tentacles. As if pained, the translucent blob retreated. As soon as he swapped out his empty cartridge, Abel again pointed his gun at its body. . . .

For an instant, a burning pain lanced through his stomach. The sensation, similar to being pierced by flames, split his abdominal muscles and went through to his back. Contrary to their transparent, gelatinous appearance, the tips of the tentacles were as hard as iron and as sharp as a drill—they were also as swift as lightning.

"These things!"

The six tentacles, severed by bullets, were wriggling around on the floor as if they were alive. All at once, they reared up like poisonous snakes and jumped at Abel.

"Crap!"

The muzzle flashed continuously in Abel's hands. Five of the

tentacles blew apart.

The remaining tentacle skewered his right wrist; Abel smashed his arm into the wall. A pulpy, disgusting sound overlapped the noise of bones creaking. When the tentacle fell off Abel's wrist, it looked like a leech that had grown fat from feasting on his flesh. Fresh blood flowed from Abel's wound. The tentacle probably had damaged an artery. The priest was losing feeling in his arm.

He couldn't use his right hand any longer. Moreover, the handgun, out of ammo, had fallen to the floor.

The Sylphide had been watching, waiting for just such an opportunity. Its gracefully supple tentacles easily wrapped around both of Abel's arms, binding him. The creature bared its fangs and descended to attack Abel's throat.

The air shook with sound—but it wasn't from Abel's terrified scream. The Sylphide, struck in the mouth by the saber that had been left carelessly on the floor, howled in pain. The creature's voice churned the air at a frequency inaudible to humans.

The priest had kicked up the saber with exquisite timing, but he couldn't stop to crow about it. The Sylphide fell. Shrinking back, the creature's body lost control of its tentacles. When the huge blob crashed onto the floor, it shook the ground. Unfortunately, the lower half of Abel's body was caught underneath it.

The sound of the priest's leg bones breaking echoed sharply.

"Are you all right, Father?" the terrorist sitting in front of the organ quietly asked. Abel couldn't answer; he was in severe pain. It felt like the lower half of his body was disappearing.

The priest was wounded from head to toe, whereas Kampfer was unharmed. If Abel had been in perfect condition, he still couldn't beat an opponent who'd bested Gunslinger. Kampfer didn't stop playing the organ, which was a clear indication of his confidence that things would go his way.

A small sound rang in his ear: "Hello, Abel?"

"Sister Noelle." Abel did his best to keep his voice calm and level.

"What's with hanging up on me, hm? What's wrong? Your voice is a little strange."

"No, it's nothing—probably, the radio is acting up." It would take twenty minutes to get from the city to the cathedral. Noelle couldn't help him, and he wasn't going to cause her to worry. Sweating profusely, Abel used all his might to continue in a calm voice: "I can hear your voice fine, Noelle. I'm okay."

"Really? You always take too much on yourself. I suppose you don't want to worry anybody, but that makes me worry more." Noelle chatted in her typical "big sister" tone. It seemed she hadn't figured out Abel was bluffing. "Don't do so much, Abel. Everybody's with you, including me. It's okay; we'll support you."

"Thanks. I'm not overwhelmed, so ..."

"If so, then fine. As I was saying before, I found something interesting in the director's office: blueprints. There were also plans for an abandoned church. I didn't know it, but the Dominic Company used a dummy company to buy the Sagrada Familia. Ah, do you know the Sagrada Familia? It's a huge cathedral in the closed district."

He heard a rustling noise; Noelle probably was leafing through documents.

"Barrie was making large renovations to the church. He was changing the bells in the towers to customized echo boards. I wonder why? If it were going to be the company's headquarters, there's no need to deliberately renovate the bells."

A thought skimmed through Abel's mind. It had been nagging at him the whole time: How had they collapsed that station? They'd used neither explosives nor shells. Their weapon was something the eye couldn't see and the ear couldn't hear.

Abel looked down at the bell towers and groaned in amazement. "So, that was it!"

The eighty-eight bells that surrounded the church responded to each musical note played on the organ. The sound waves were concentrated and controlled electrically. The eighteenth tower amplified the sound of the bells.

The Sagrada Familia itself was a huge instrument.

"Noelle, get out of the city!" Abel shouted. Can she escape in time? Despair invaded his heart. He couldn't lose her again! "Noelle! The city is in danger!"

"Wait! There's one more page from the plans," Noelle said. "No way, that building is—"

"Never mind that! Hurry, get out of here!"

"Why are these plans in a place like this? Listen, Abel! Now—" Noelle's breathless voice suddenly was cut off.

"Noelle?" Abel didn't call out to his partner because he'd truly expected to continue their conversation. He simply couldn't bear the uneasy silence. "Noelle, what's wrong?"

No response from the earpiece—not so much as the sound of her breath or background noise.

Seized with a very bad premonition, Abel spoke in a shaky voice: "Noelle, please answer!"

Dimly, he could hear a low rumble.

A bomb? No, something different. It sounded like an unbelievably huge object was falling to the ground.

"Ah."

West of the city, where several banks and businesses were concentrated, dust was rising. Inside that smoke, a tall white building was sinking, as if unable to bear its own weight.

"Matter has certain characteristics. Far lower than what is audible to humans, matter operates on low-range frequency waves." Wizard

seemed indifferent to what he was saying. He didn't seem at all like a murderer who'd just robbed hundreds of people of their lives. "The 'Silent Noise'—the low-frequency resonance decay induction system—incorporated into this bell leads to the destruction of any structure within a targeted area. It's still in the experimental stage, but it seems to be effective. Yes, yes, the Tinker Bell System that you destroyed on Never Land Island is kind of a spin off of this."

The courteous explanation didn't reach Abel's ears, because the Dominic Pharmaceuticals building in the west still was collapsing.

As if triggered by that, buildings beside the Dominic Company office started crumbling. Like milk poured into coffee, white smoke billowed into the darkness of the town itself. Harbor and church, market and main street, ramshackle homes of the poor and mansions of the rich—everything was being destroyed. The work of millions of lives and a few thousand years was morphing into a mountain of rubble, destroyed by a low rumble. The reality was so harsh that it seemed surreal.

"He who sees beauty is taken early by the hand of Death"—Plato. What did you think of this evening's performance, Father? I hope you enjoyed it." Wizard bowed respectfully.

In answer, Abel let loose an ominous scream, cursing the world. A tremendous spray of blood seemed to soak the very air of the church as the priest tore the Sylphide into tiny pieces.

Abel's hoarse voice echoed nightmarishly throughout the hall. "Nanomachine Crusnik 02 forty percent limited performance—authorized!" The priest's eyes were stained the color of blood.

Abel twirled a huge scythe, which had swords on either end of its handle. A blade as dark as night swung at Kampfer's head with such force that it pressurized the air. "How dare you? How dare you!"

Looking up at Abel's enraged eyes, Kampfer said seriously: "I'm very sorry that you seem to be displeased. This, too, was business." He stood quietly, placing both hands in his pockets.

Abel's scythe was stopped a few inches above his head, as if Wizard

were standing behind an invisible wall. "Our next client wanted to see the power of Silent Noise in action. We gave him a demonstration."

"For that kind of thing ..."

Abel's face had changed drastically. He was no longer the easygoing, people-loving, clumsy priest. He didn't look human, in any case. "You killed her ... for that?"

He slowly lowered his blade using sheer willpower. Ripping apart the defensive electromagnetic Shield of Asmoday spread around Kampfer, Abel's jet-black weapon descended toward the crown of his enemy's head—fifteen inches, five inches, two inches.



Kampfer's voice was calm as he looked up at his impending death. "Indeed. You want to make the whole world your enemy."

The red-eyed monster froze.

"You want to make an enemy of the whole world all at once, don't you, Abel?"

He'd heard those words before. A soft voice. A kind smile. He'd once believed that everything in the world was filled with hostility, but that was a long time ago. He'd heard those words before...

"Where?" The scythe's terrible strength suddenly disappeared. "Answer me! From whom did you hear those words?"

"We'll meet again, Father Nightroad. No, I should call you Abel."

"Wait!"

Bowing, Wizard's shadow slinked away.

Abel came back to himself, but it was too late. Darkness had enveloped Kampfer's body. Abel's scythe swept downward; instead of spraying the terrorist's blood, it splintered fragments of the floor.

"It can't be. This kind of thing . . ." Abel fell to his knees on the floor, groaning.

There was no sign of anybody in the hall, which was now a ruin ruled by death and silence.

"I ... again, I ..."

The sound of the organ couldn't be heard anymore.

Caterina was pale as she returned to her private chamber. When she got to her desk, she sighed deeply, ducking under the golden hair that hung over her face.

"How was the conference, Your Eminence? Any developments?" asked Sister Kate, the holographic nun with the mole under her eye.

"The perpetrator of the Barcelona incidents has been identified."

News of the destruction in Barcelona had reached Rome three days earlier. Caterina hadn't slept at all since then. Anyone other than the "Woman of Steel" would have passed out by now.

"Barrie was responsible for the crimes. He got his hands on lost technology somewhere, using it to eliminate any hindrances to the experiments carried out by his own company. Unfortunately, the technology ran amok, and he destroyed the whole Barcelona business district along with himself." She grimaced. "Well, that's what the public announcement will say."

"There's no way an individual could get their hands on that much lost technology!"

"The cardinals' conference has come to that conclusion. Their version of the events is the Vatican's public opinion on the matter. Those foolish old men! They don't know anything!"

Caterina pounded the desk with her white fist. Sister Kate's hologram flickered as if she were afraid of the violent emotion her superior suddenly showed.

"The Orden is unbelievably sly. We're puppets, always dancing on their stage. The puppeteers won't show themselves. It's the same as it was ten years ago!"

"Your Eminence . . ." She's so isolated. Kate gazed pityingly at her superior.

Caterina was wise; if she'd been stupid, she probably wouldn't have become aware of the Orden's existence ten years ago. She might have had a happy family, lived a worldly life . . . she might not have been robbed of those dear to her.

"Sister Kate!"

"Yes!"

The shadow had disappeared from the cardinal's beautiful face, and a glint rekindled in her razor-sharp eyes. "What's the situation in Barcelona? Has Sister Noelle's body been recovered?"

"Seventy percent of it. The damage was so severe, it will take some time."

"Hurry it up. We have to confirm what she discovered."

"Very good. I'll inform those on the scene."

The tragedy in Barcelona was merely a prologue. The Orden undoubtedly was planning its next terrorist attack.

After the hologram of the nun disappeared, Caterina stood up. Leaning on the windowsill, she gazed out through her monocle.

Somber in the soft sunlight of early spring, a cathedral furnished with beautiful cupolas stood tall. Countless people bustled in the square. Not a cloud could be seen in the sky over the refined shops and homes that spread beyond the plaza.

Rome—the closest city to heaven on Earth—was furnished with architecture of perfect beauty and complete harmony.

"That's why it's fragile."

Rome—the greatest city in the world—ignorant of grief, quietly dozed in transient peace.

Overcount

Yet he could not heal you, nor cure your wound.

— *Hosea 5:13*

I

The Vatican State Affairs Office located in Rome, commonly called "Palazzio Spada," was conspicuously beautiful.

The castle, which stood on the opposite bank of the Tiber River and across from San Pietro, was decorated with statues of ancient heroes and goddesses. The pompous stone façade was reminiscent of an ancient pagan temple. The building looked dignified enough to be the center of the Vatican's diplomatic activity. Ambassadors from every nation frequently resided there, so a strict, vigilant attitude ensured the castle's security.

"Hey, is the Duchess of Milan in?"

That afternoon, the man who appeared in the chief secretary's office was the very embodiment of something suspicious.

The man was nearly six feet tall, and a three-day beard fringed his swarthy face. He was wearing a cassock, but his collar was untidy, and his long, bushy hair obviously had not been combed. Sister Loretta didn't call the guards because his manly smile—which resembled an expression a predator reserved for its prey—also held a kind of wicked charm.

"Excuse me, but who might you be?" Loretta hurriedly closed the document she'd been reading before warily schooling her expression. Her superior, Cardinal Caterina Sforza, was out, visiting the Pope. Loretta didn't know where this stranger had wandered in from; as the secretary on duty, however, she knew she should chase off such a suspicious man. "Her Eminence doesn't see people without an appointment. Please, request an audience beforehand with the executive office. If you pass inspection, we'll contact you."

"Are you new here, miss? You're cute," the stranger said.

"Eh?" There was no time to draw back. The stranger bent his huge

body forward, peeking into her face. It would be difficult to call this man a "pretty boy," but he was handsome enough that Loretta's heart danced lightly.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"How old are you?"

"Eh?"

"Do you currently have a boyfriend?"

"Ah?"

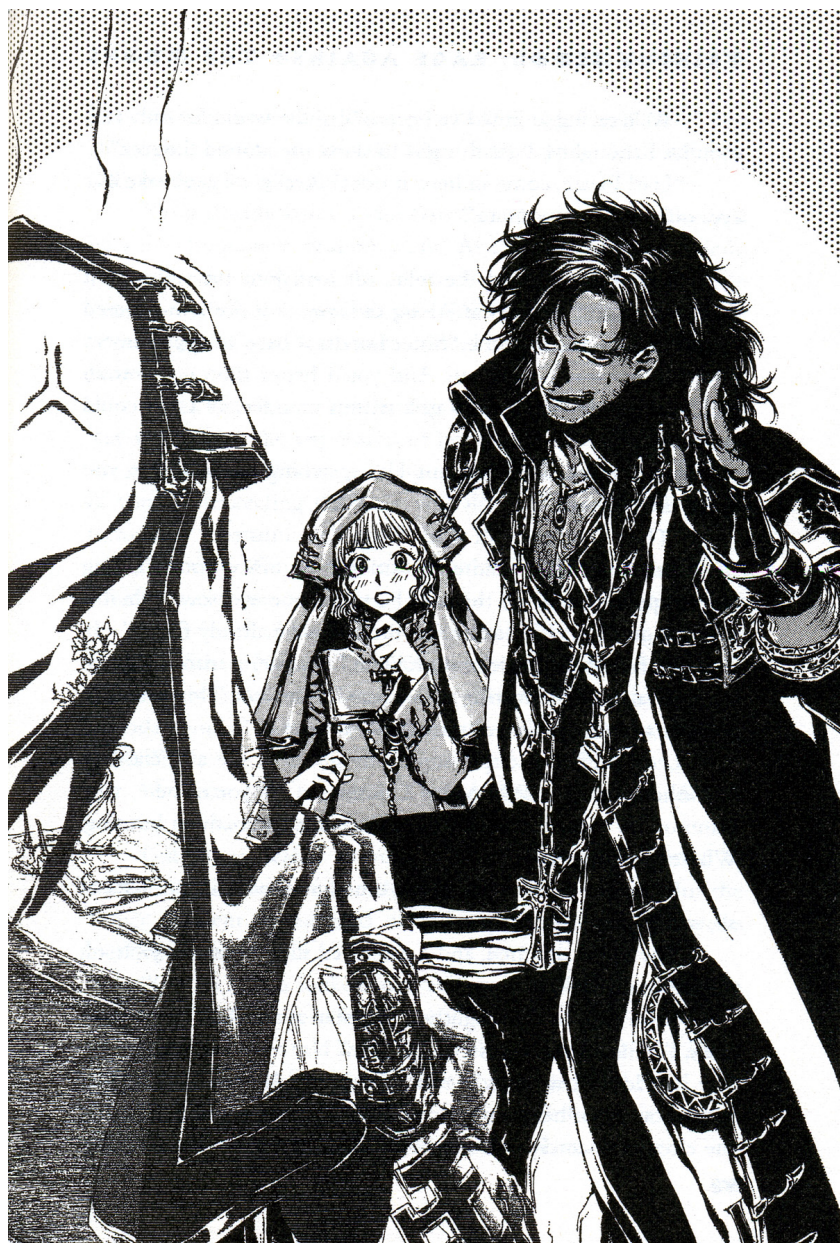
Loretta should have been able to say something about his extremely rude questions. Maybe she should have slapped him.

The man launched a fresh attack on the embarrassed, blushing nun: He brazenly sat on her desk and grasped her hand. "When do you get off? I know a restaurant near the Pantheon with ridiculously tasty food."

"What are you doing, Father Leon?" A woman's sharp voice saved poor Loretta's endangered chastity.

In an instant, another nun stood behind the giant priest. She was a beautiful woman with a delicate appearance, but the mole beneath her eye was twitching in irritation. She looked like she had a headache.

Through her transparent body, Leon could see the door of the chief secretary's office. "Hey, Kate." AX Agent Father Leon Garcia de Asturias looked at the nun's hologram and smiled like a child caught being mischievous. "It's been a long time. Have you been well?"



"Been well"? No! Leon, what are you doing?"

"Well, seeing as how I've been out in the world for only two months, I thought I'd get this girl to show me around the city."

"Liar! Please, come in here at once! Really, we can't take our eyes off you for a moment."

"Yes, yes."

Sister Kate ushered the reluctant man into the office as if she were chasing a feral cat. Along the way, as if she remembered something, she turned back. "Sister Loretta, I have an appointment now. Please, clear people out. And you'd better thoroughly wash your hands. Any female who gets within nine feet of Leon could get pregnant."

Leon smirked. "What am I, a spawning salmon? See you again, little Loretta."

"There'll be none of that!" Sister Kate insisted.

Grinning, Leon sauntered through the office door. Finding an unexpected guest on the sofa, he raised one eyebrow. "Oh, if it isn't the gunman? I heard he was broken; is he already fixed?"

"Affirmative. There's no problem," the young man sitting on the sofa answered, wearing a deadpan expression. This priest, in contrast to Leon, wore an immaculate cassock.

Leon sniffed in displeasure as he glared at the artificial face of Father Tres Iqus, AX Agent Gunslinger. "If you're here, why summon me from the villa? Heh heh, I smell something burning. Where's the fire, Kate?"

In answer to Leon's question, the nun raised a finger. "First of all, would you look this way?"

The lights dimmed, and a projected slide became visible on the darkened wall.

Leon's lips twisted slightly as he gazed at the slide. "Barcelona?"

Huh, I've heard the stories. It's terrible."

He looked at heaps of rubble and reddish-black puddles that seeped out from between piles of debris. For someone ignorant of the circumstances, it would be difficult to recognize the formerly beautiful city once called "the jewel of the Mediterranean." No, although Leon knew exactly what had happened, it still was difficult to believe.

"You already know about Barcelona having been destroyed by a low-frequency weapon, right? At the time of the incident, Agent Crusnik, who'd been there on investigation, made contact with the criminal responsible for the devastation. That terrorist gave Crusnik advance notice that he planned to destroy Rome."

Kate's expression was hard as she explained the facts. The way she held in the expression of her emotions simply broadcast the secrets of her heart more eloquently. "This time, while the two of you are protecting Caterina, you also will prevent this act of terrorism."

"Destroy Rome, eh? Isn't it a bluff?" Leon scratched his chest, his expression careless. However, his eyes, which pierced the mountain of rubble with their intense focus, were sharp. "You called it 'Silent Noise'? Didn't I hear that the Barcelona low-frequency weapon was a huge device that used all the bells of the Sagrada Familia? Where could they hide a thing like that here in Rome?"

"It's our duty to search. The possibility that this advance warning is false is extremely low," Kate said.

Gunslinger leafed through a file. "If the information is correct, the terrorist in Barcelona is the same criminal from the Venice incident. Some kind of destructive activity in Rome is highly probable."

"Oh ho." Leon looked back at Tres; he thought he'd heard a faint waver in Tres' typically flat voice.

Leon had been told about the incident in Venice. In the attack on the canal gates three months prior, Gunslinger had battled with the criminal. He'd heard that Tres had incurred serious damage, narrowly succeeding in foiling the terrorist's plans.

"Well, hadn't we better settle this matter right away? I'm certain the Duchess of Milan is in the Pope's palace."

The two priests stood, but Kate stopped them. "Ah, please wait. There's one more warning from Caterina concerning this investigation." She paused. "At present, the city police and special duty police are on emergency alert. I don't think it will come to this; however, just in case: By all means, please don't clash with the police."

"On my way here, the police were swarming like flies. What's up with that?" Leon asked.

"Archbishop Alfonso d'Este is coming to Rome. That's why they're on alert," Tres said.

"Alfonso. Now, where have I heard that name before?" Leon frowned. He turned his eyes to the ceiling, searching his memory, and then he clapped his hands. "Ah, I remember—that pitiful old man who lost to his nephew at the Conclave. Isn't he cowering somewhere out of the country?"

"Watch your language, Father Leon." Kate hurriedly rebuked the priest; he could be charged with treason for saying something like that.

Alfonso d'Este, the Archbishop of Cologne, was the younger son of the former Pope, Gregorio XXX (who'd been a lecher but an excellent politician) and the uncle of the current Pope, Alessandro XVIII. Indeed, he was remembered as the miserable old man who had lost the papal election to his nephew five years ago.

After Gregorio's sudden death, Alfonso's selection to become the next Pope was regarded as the obvious choice. His lineage was exceptional, but it was his political skill—with which he had supported his older brother for many years—that people valued highly both at home and abroad.

The recovery of Gregorio's illegitimate son, Alessandro, was the work of Alessandro's half-siblings: Francesco di Medici—the Duke of Florence—and Caterina Sforza—the Duchess of Milan.

In the initial elections, both cardinals pretended to support Alessandro's uncle, resulting in Alfonso besting the other opposing candidates. Then suddenly, they backed their younger brother, Alessandro. They turned on Alfonso and cleverly snatched up all the votes that would have gone to the losing candidates.

"So, the defeated old man also resigned as cardinal and withdrew to the countryside of Germanicus. Essentially, he's been pouting all this time?"

"He's coming back to Rome after five years. At last, the uncle and nephew can make amends. It would be awful if something were to happen to interrupt that," Sister Kate said.

"Well, we won't have any spare time for playing with the police, in any case." Despite his huge body, Leon's footsteps didn't make any noise. Like a lazy, ill-tempered stray cat, he sauntered out of the room; suddenly, he turned around. "Oh, by the way ...What happened to that bungling priest? Is he on this mission, too?"

"No, that's . . ." The nun's face clouded, her hologram flickering faintly.

II

"Please wait, Father!" A shrill voice echoed in the gloomy chapel. "Men are forbidden in this convent! His Holiness the Pope himself may not enter!"

"Please let me pass, Director." The grave voice that answered indeed belonged to a man. Within the halls of the Santa Maria Cloche, which strictly regulated the chastity of its members, a male voice hadn't been heard for a few hundred years.

The owner of the voice—the silver-haired priest—fixed his blue eyes on the middle-aged abbess. "There's something I have to investigate. When I'm done, I'll leave. Please, get out of my way."

Although she involuntarily flinched at the priest's completely lifeless, hollow voice, the director courageously said, "No! Please, leave at once! What do you mean by suddenly wanting to investigate the belfry? If it's scientific research, please go through the lay council. After that, a female church worker—"

"There's no time!" His tone was as harsh as a winter storm. His was an empty voice that, although violent enough to make the nuns duck their heads, somehow sounded hopeless.

He took out a crumpled scrap of paper from his dirty cassock's pocket. The priest carefully spread out the paper. The names of many churches and convents in Rome were written there in small, crowded letters.

"There's no time. There's no time. There are so many bells we haven't investigated yet. If we don't investigate them quickly, it will be like Barcelona all over again! Let me through there!" He roughly shoved the abbess to the side.

"Kyah!"

Without a backward glance, the priest pushed through the cluster of nuns trying to bar his way. His hollow-cheeked face looked stony and determined. His tall body, which had been approaching the belfry, suddenly somersaulted and fell.

"Guh . . ." They've probably shot me in the hip, considering the speed at which I've fallen.

Two figures looked down at the priest, who was moaning softly. He was draped halfway across a couch, which he'd smashed into during his fall.

"What are you doing here, Father Nightroad?" an icy, emotionless voice asked.

"Hey, hey, we haven't seen you for a while! We've been looking all over for you, Abel!" said a broken, hoarse voice.

Outside the window, remnants of the sinking sun cast subtle rays of light. Inside the restaurant, government officials returning from business mingled with off-duty church workers. A cheerful waitress brought a huge steak and a heaping salad to the table farthest inside the restaurant.

"Oh ho, it's here, it's here." Leon pushed aside the salad bowl and placed the huge slab of meat—which was so rare it still dripped blood—in front of him.

"You should eat the salad, Abel. As far back as I can remember, I've hated other priests and fresh vegetables."

Abel's downcast eyes looked at the table, but he didn't seem to see anything.

Stuffing most of the meat into his mouth in one bite, Leon shrugged

as if amused. "Hey, hey, you look as though you've come from Barcelona to spread its bad luck around. Don't be shy; it's your treat. Eat up."

"It is as Father Garcia says: You have eighteen hundred seconds until you must present yourself to the Vatican. Replenish yourself as quickly as possible, Father Nightroad," said Tres, who stood motionless. Being a Killing Doll, Tres didn't need food, in the normal sense. In order to support his brain cortex and part of his cerebellum—which were organic—he took vitamins with distilled water once a month. "In the Vatican, we're on duty twenty-four hours a day. I recommend performing nutrition replenishment whenever it is possible."

"Not going," Abel murmured.

"What?"

"I'm not going." Abel repeated himself in a deliberately soft voice. Indeed, underneath his quiet demeanor, impossibly deep emotions churned. Shaking, he took out the crumpled paper. "There's something I have to do, bells I haven't investigated yet. Look, there are this many left. I can't go until I investigate them all!"

Leon gnawed on his rare steak before saying, "You idiot. How many churches do you think there are in Rome? If you count the private chapels of the nobility, it's more than three or four hundred."

In contrast to Leon's, Tres' demeanor was as cold as ice. "As for bells inside the city, the city police and special police already have conducted a joint investigation. All results were negative."

"If you overstep your bounds, Father Nightroad, your investigation will be considered illegal. Your appearance at the Vatican is not the Duchess of Milan's request—it's an order. You have no right to refuse to do exactly what she asks of you."

"Then, I quit."

"Quit"? Meaning unknown. Re-input your answer," Tres said.

"I quit—both AX and being an agent. Wouldn't that be all right?"

"I will regard any further insubordinate utterances as deserting under enemy fire, Father Nightroad." Tres extended his hand to his hip holster.

Thick fingers grasped Tres' arm. "Leave it at that, Gunslinger." Leon effectively stopped his comrade before wiping his mouth with a napkin. "If we have a shootout in a place like this, the police will come flying in. Wouldn't Kate nail us to the cross for that?"

As if by magic, the steak in front of Leon had disappeared. After he gulped down an entire bottle of beer, Leon belched. "Phew, life is lived for a meal like this! So, Abel, are you really sure? If you quit AX now, won't there be all kinds of trouble? I don't know ..."

"I'm no good."

"Huh?" Leon raised his eyebrows and picked his teeth.

Abel's vacant eyes were focused firmly on Leon's untouched salad. "I couldn't save them . . . again. I let someone who was counting on me die ... again. I'm no good!"

"All right." Leon softly placed his hand on his overwhelmed comrade's shoulder. He patted Abel, who was trembling. He whispered kindly, "I know perfectly well that you're an incurable coward."

Nobody—not even Tres—caught sight of the answering blow. By the time the people around them became aware that Abel's cheek had been stuck, the priest's body and his chair already were flying into the neighboring table. Utensils danced in the air and rolled on the floor.

"There are two things in this world that I can't stand!" The giant priest, who'd struck a heroic pose, roared ferociously. "One: restaurants that refuse to serve meat. The other: bastards without balls who snivel and cry over their women being killed!"

Again, he sharply kicked Abel, who still hadn't gotten up from the sudden blow. The attack was merciless and threatened to rupture Abel's internal organs. Looking down at his former comrade—who

was now vomiting—Leon sneered.

"Bah, it's Noelle's loss for getting killed over a blockhead like this. We're going, Tres! We have no use for a coward. On the contrary, he'll slow us down."

"Affirmative." Tres took the bill. His cold, calculating face showed no sign of emotion or shade of contempt. "Father Nightroad—no, Mister Abel Nightroad, I'll communicate your retirement request to the Duchess of Milan. There's no need for you to appear at the Vatican or Palazzio Spada again."

The two AX agents left the restaurant without turning around.

"He's cute, isn't he?" a man asked his companion as Leon exited the restaurant with Tres in tow.

As soon as the priests got into their car, they sped off without a backward glance.

The young man -watched their car's taillights grow distant. He took a sip of espresso. It tasted slightly bitter—but coming from the most famous cafe in Rome, it was delicious.

"I know you like to tease, Isaac. His face is similar, but his character is completely different from that person. That's why you're vexed, right?"

"'Work is half of life, and the other half is also work'— Kestner. I'm just working, Puppeteer." Mixed in with the aroma of espresso was the mellow scent of tobacco smoke. In the blue darkness of late evening, the long-haired man put a cigarillo in his mouth. "I don't work for the sake of my emotions—although I may insert my emotions into my work."

"Which means you haven't found a way to extract emotions?"

The beautiful young man narrowed his laughing eyes.

Dressed in their simple slacks and shirts, the men looked like budding painters or philosophy students. Their lovely, porcelain-white features didn't stop people from seeing them as attractive men. Women passing by this cafe's terrace walked extremely slowly, hoping to get a longer look.

"So, how's the work going, Isaac? Have you finished bringing in the big equipment?"

"Yes, that part is long done. All that remains is to activate it in accordance with the client's wishes. The demonstration in Barcelona seems to have been to his liking. He considerably hastened our schedule."

"Heh heh. Well, then, how far do you think -we'll go to defeat the priest?" He nodded at the restaurant the two priests had left. The silver-haired priest had come out just then.

Abel stood there for a while; at last, he rounded his back and began to walk into the crowd, looking dejected. He often was tripped and insulted, yet he trudged on, his tottering figure growing smaller.

"Aw, he's so down, Isaac. Maybe you teased him a little too much. Far from rising to the bait, he might slit his wrists instead."

"This is my work. As an observer, you have no right to criticize. Besides, you can't encourage me to console him," said Isaac. He was dressed neatly in a black funeral suit. He stroked his hip-length black hair back off his suit jacket and stared quietly at his companion's handsome face. "Although he looks so sad, he's still a god. He's one of the first gods we humans have contacted since the dawn of history. If we underestimate him, -we'll be destroyed."

"He's a god? The god of what—poverty? He looks like a human to me."

"Humans can't take seven million lives. They can't turn the world into an enemy, turn their comrades into enemies, and turn themselves into an enemy, too. Yes, he . . ."

Puppeteer noticed that his companion's hand faintly trembled as it pushed the cigarillo into the ashtray. His voice was dripping with delight and madness as the man spoke, "He's the god of slaughter."

III

Four angel statues stood on the altar's canopy, quietly looking W down on the mortals gathered in the cathedral.

"Pope sanguine nobilis, virtute nobilior ..." The voice of the man prostrated before the shining golden altar wasn't loud, but it echoed inside the church. On his left shoulder, the purple sash that indicated he was an ambassador drooped on the white marble floor. "Vive pius, moriere piua, cole sacra, fiat dei voluntas. Amen. It's been a long time, Your Holiness."

"It has been a long time, Uncle Alfonso."

As soon as he walked out from between the halberd guards lined up in rows beside the altar, the white-robed young man extended his hand. The emerald fisherman's ring that sparkled on his bony ring finger symbolized that he was God's agent on Earth.

The young man—the three hundred ninety-ninth Pope, Alessandro XVIII—rewarded his uncle with a weak smile. "Th-th-thank you for your hard work as the A-Archbishop of Cologne. I trust nothing has gone wrong since then?"

"No, Your Holiness—by the grace of God and Your Holiness," Alfonso d'Este, the Archbishop of Cologne, answered with a slightly Germanic accent. He had recently turned fifty, but his white hair made him look much older. His ash-colored eyes, sharp as needles, now gazed at his nephew.

"Your Holiness looks as well as ever." He turned his head. "Oh, both Francesco and Caterina—it's also been a long time."

"Uncle, it has been a long time."

"We haven't kept in touch, Uncle."

A man and woman in scarlet vestments waited behind the Pope. They greeted Alfonso, who smiled at them with fond sentiment.

Cardinal Francesco di Medici, the Pope's half-brother, was a great and dauntless man. The elegant, beautiful woman next to him was his half-sister, Cardinal Caterina Sforza. They were the two most powerful members of the Vatican; Francesco governed internal administration matters as the Minister of the Inquisition, and Caterina handled matters of diplomacy as the Foreign Affairs Minister.

"Has it been five years since we last met? Your progress is legendary. When I heard of your active ways, I was a proud uncle," Alfonso said.

"It's hard to believe five years has passed already." Caterina's voice was mixed with faint, conflicting emotions. Although she'd always hoped for Alessandro to be Pope, she suddenly came to think of her uncle's hardships, almost as if losing the election had thrown him into exile.

When Caterina's father, Gregorio, still had been alive, Alfonso concurrently had been the leader of the cardinals, Director of the Department of Inquisition, and Foreign Affairs Minister. He had made drastic cuts in the Vatican's reforms. He was strict with himself and all the more rigid with others; he had no forgiveness for corrupt church workers and showed no compassion at all to impious lords. When he was in power, many high-ranking church workers were burned at the stake, and many countries were attacked and overthrown.

"II Furioso"—that had been his nickname.

After Gregorio's death, if II Furioso had succeeded to the status of papal ruler, the course of history would have changed drastically. Of course Caterina—a realist—and Francesco—who had very similar ideas to his uncle—feared that the common lords would be disaffected by Alfonso's enthronement. So, the brother and sister had formed their first and last alliance; educated their younger brother, who had such excellent lineage; and opposed their uncle.

Caterina looked at her uncle with misery. Nevertheless, he's aged . .

There was no trace of Il Furioso in his lined face. Five years in a foreign country seemed to have extracted much of his venom. Alfonso stood there, a harmless, powerless, defeated old man, silently hoping his remaining years would be easy ones.

"Now that you mention it, Uncle, thank you very much for the many expensive presents." Francesco's thoughts seemed to be similar to his half-sister's. With rare sympathy playing on his face—the angles of which looked like they'd been carved with a hatchet—Francesco bowed. "When I was in financial straits, you saved me. I wished to thank you with this gift. Its deterioration was just starting to show, so I thought you should have a new one soon."

"Well, well, for someone like me, I thought it might be presumptuous ... "Alfonso shook his head, grinning. "After all, the Vatican is the face we show to the world. Luckily, I was able to gather donations not merely from Cologne, but from Uber Berlin, as well. . . . So, how is its condition?"

"It's being installed now. I'll look at it after the benediction ceremony. In any case, is Germanicus such a wealthy kingdom?"

"Yes. Among the developing nations, industrialization is progressing surprisingly well. After the former Ostmark annexation, they seem to be aiming wholeheartedly for invasion of Bohemia, so the neighboring common lords are getting nervous. That nation always has been in the habit of making an enemy of the world."

Caterina gazed at the two men who intently began to discuss the international situation. She coughed. Her body was tired; she hadn't slept well since the Barcelona incident, and she'd caught a bit of a cold. Additionally, she was starting her period. The truth was, she wanted to have a good night's sleep in her mansion . . .

"Sister, a-a-are you a-a-all right?" the Pope asked anxiously.

"I'm all right, Alec. Don't worry." She smiled to reassure her little brother and made an effort to control her coughing fit.

No matter how tired she was, she couldn't rest now. She wouldn't allow herself to overlook any trouble while her uncle was in Rome. She had to be alert.

"Duchess of Milan," a voice tentatively called.

Caterina suddenly came to.

Beyond the row of halberd guards, whose lances' tips sparkled, stood an expressionless young man and a swarthy giant. They both wore cassocks.

"What happened to Father Nightroad, Father Tres?" Flicking her earpiece, she remembered that she couldn't use her radio inside the cathedral. Caterina dropped her hand from her earlobe to touch her brother's shoulder, and she whispered quietly, "I'm going to get some fresh air for a little while. Can you keep our uncle company during that time, Alec?"

"Y-yes, Sister! P-p-please leave it to me."

"Thank you. Do your best."

Caterina squeezed his hand and then turned to leave. Her uncle still was talking earnestly with her half-brother. She figured they wouldn't mind if she left for a little while. Although she didn't notice, her uncle's cold gaze concentrated on her back as she left the church.

She looked around the dark plaza, peering up at the large, dazzlingly lit-up cathedral dome. It was one hundred twenty-five feet in diameter and ninety-five feet high. Caterina thought it looked like the head of a giant. The pillared halls, which extended in opposite directions from the delicate façade, looked like huge arms hugging the plaza.

Normally, the San Pietro plaza was full of church workers and pilgrims, but there was no sign of anyone tonight. In the center of the deserted plaza rested two water fountains and a narrow obelisk, which soared into the night sky.

"Such a thing in a place like this?" Tres murmured. "I first saw

Father Leon in this plaza. That wasn't here then. This thing was built recently."

Caterina sat down next to the obelisk, sighing softly. The early summer night was warm, but she couldn't stop shivering and coughing. "Long before the Armageddon, an obelisk, brought here from the far south, stood in this plaza. About one hundred years ago, it fell over in an earthquake. That was during the age of Clements XIX; since then, it was left in disrepair. This is the obelisk that Uncle Alfonso brought the day before yesterday to commemorate his visit to Rome. Never mind that, continue what you were saying before." After she leaned on the obelisk, Caterina wearily opened her mouth. "Ab—Father Nightroad said he wished to retire? He seems to have taken the Barcelona incident quite to heart."

"Yes. He's a perfect fool!" said Leon, who stood nearby, stiff and aloof. He'd neatly pressed his collar and shaved his face. As long as he didn't speak, he gave the impression of a proper church worker. "If I forced him to go on this operation when he's in that state, I think he'd either fall on his face or get himself killed. For now, we've left him alone until he cools his head. Please, forgive my arrogance in making this decision without discussing it with you, Your Eminence."

"It's the appropriate decision, Father Leon. If I'd been there, I probably would've said the same thing."

Although she was sincerely grateful to her subordinate, Caterina's expression remained melancholy.

In terms of relations with foreign countries, the Vatican's Ministry of State was equivalent to the city's Department of Foreign Affairs. In addition to managing the Pope's embassies and the dioceses in each country, it was Caterina's duty to conduct diplomatic negotiations with the common lords. In those situations alone, she could exert nearly unlimited power on activities outside Vatican territory. However, her authority inside Vatican territory was extremely limited.

Incidentally, the Ministry of Doctrine consistently controlled the

police and administered justice within Vatican territory, including Rome. Cardinal Francesco di Medici was responsible for all that. At present, he was Caterina's most difficult political opponent. If the staff of the Ministry of State trespassed on the Ministry of Doctrine's territory over this incident, Francesco would lose no time in crushing Caterina, who was also the Secretary of the Ministry of State. If there was an emergency in Rome, Caterina could depend only on her secret unit — the nine AX agents.

Tres, who'd been maintaining a firm silence while she spoke with Leon, finally opened his mouth: "Duchess of Milan, isn't there another agent you can recall? Statistically, it's most effective for a terrorist to strike the city during the visit of an important person. Namely, the presence of Archbishop Alfonso presents a great risk. Isn't there another unit you can send to support us, perhaps a on short-term basis?"

"Other agents . . ." Removing her monocle, Caterina thought.

The Professor was in the middle of a war with a slave trade syndicate in the Kingdom of Hispania. Sword Dancer was pitted against an entire clan of vampires in Bruges, and she'd received information that No Face was on a mission to recapture a relic stolen by a heretic society in Prague. The others were in similar situations. There were no free hands.

"It can't be helped. If it's going to be like this, we'll manage by ourselves somehow, Tres."

"Affirmative. It's unavoidable."

"Please, Gunslinger, Dandelion—do your best," Caterina begged with a small cough.

Alfonso's lodgings were inside the Pope's palace, so she probably would keep her uncle company until late that night. Tomorrow morning, a mass was scheduled with high-ranking church workers, including the cardinals.

It looked like there would be no sleep for her tonight, either.

"I'll rest here a little while longer. At any rate, I'll probably stay here for the night. I'll return before the benediction ceremony. Until then, both of you: Please, stay by His Holiness' side."

The cathedral's clock indicated it was forty minutes past eight. There was a little more time until the evening prayer bell rang, announcing the end of the day. Languid, Caterina watched the darkness swallow up her two subordinates as they walked inside the cathedral.

It was a quiet night. The two moons watched over her. In preparation for the early morning mass attended by the Pope, the entire area was off-limits to the public. Except for the occasional mounted guard clattering by, there was no sign of anybody in the plaza—almost.

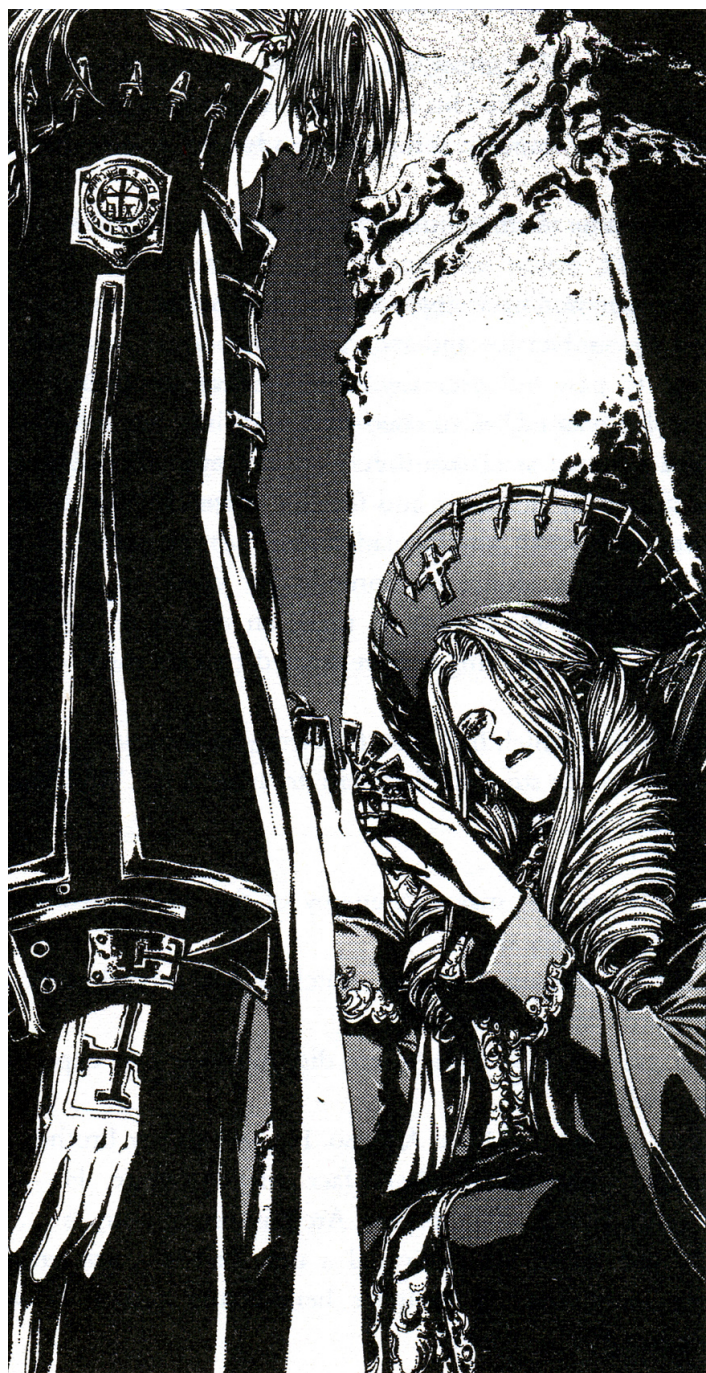
"Good evening, Abel." Caterina's beautiful voice was gentle as she addressed the shadow that now stood beside her. "The night air feels good, doesn't it? The breeze is refreshing."

"Good evening, Caterina." He was quiet, but she could hear him. His eyes were downcast.

Caterina remained calm and silent. Leaning her slender body against the obelisk, she listened to the nighttime insects.

They both appeared to be frozen in time, but then Abel spoke: "I'm sorry, Caterina." His expression couldn't be seen in the moonlight. He was shaking as if he were wounded deep in his heart. "I'm sorry. I ..."

Abel fell silent again. He reminded Caterina of a child who had nowhere to go but home, although he knew once he got there, he'd be scolded. She wore a tranquil smile; at length, she touched the rosary that hung around the priest's neck.



"Do you remember, Abel?"

"Eh?"

"Ten years ago, when we met ... I remember the promise I made you."

Cradling the man's rosary lovingly in her palm, Caterina spoke as if chanting a prayer: "That time, when you saved my life, you said 'I have to protect humans. So, I saved you.' Do you remember what I said?"

A small, clear voice answered: "I have to stop the enemies of mankind. Let's fight together."

"And I have never forgotten that promise, Abel."

Caterina made a fist. Her fingers, white as alabaster, firmly grasped the rosary with surprising strength. She gazed into the priest's eyes. "Your enemy is my enemy; you and I are fighting with the same sword. Therefore, don't fight alone again."

"Thank you, Caterina." His eyes, as blue as a winter lake, reflected his gratitude. "Really, thank you."

"Not at all."

She combed a hand through her luxurious hair and laughed. Caterina stood up. At last, it was nine o'clock.

"Well, let's return to the others. Alec is probably afraid to be on his own. And I said I'd return in time for closing prayers. You come, too, Father Nightroad."

"Understood." Cutting across the broad plaza, Abel followed his superior. He scratched his face, as if to cover his embarrassment. "Time goes by so quickly. Ten years already have passed since that day?"

"From time to time, I think, if not for that kind of thing . . ."

"If not?"

"I might not have entered the holy world; I would have stayed at the university and married somebody I loved. If that had come to pass, however, my older brother would have done whatever he wanted." Caterina snickered, but her ash-colored eyes were as sharp as razors; they were the eyes of an ambitious woman, feared by domestic and foreign enemies. "If my brother had gone unchecked, the Vatican would be in trouble. As soon as you leave him alone, he immediately wants to antagonize the whole world. He'd want to make an enemy of the whole world all at once. He might have started two or three crusades by now."

Abel's feet, which had been following his superior until then, got tangled up. He stopped, desperate to avoid a fall. "C-Caterina, what did you just say?"

"Eh?"

"He'd want to make an enemy of the whole world all at once.' Didn't you say that?"

"Yes." Confused, Caterina watched her subordinate's face change color. "What about it?"

He grabbed her. "Wh-where did you hear that expression? No, from whom!"

"My uncle . . . Uncle Alfonso. He said to my brother . . ."

"From the archbishop?" Abel's face turned white. He asked again, spittle flying, "Right now, Archbishop Alfonso is...?"

"He's in the belfry. He dedicated a new bell to commemorate this visit to Rome. At tonight's benediction ceremony, we're consecrating that . . . Abel?"

"Stay in the plaza! Don't go into the church!" he shouted, running off toward the cathedral.

If a person everyone perceives as a victim is actually one of the assailants . . .

After the Barcelona incident provided some intelligence about the terrorists, Francesco and the police had postponed Alfonso's visit and adopted strict, vigilant policies in security. All the bells in Rome had been investigated, and people entering Rome had been checked over thoroughly.

However, one bell hadn't been investigated: the bell Alfonso himself had brought for the dedication. One person hadn't been checked over: Alfonso.

Running up the stairs, Abel shouted, "No, don't strike that bell!"

IV

"No, don't strike that bell!" As the man ran into the room, the first people to respond were two halberd guards who'd been standing at the door. Their artificially enhanced battle strength could match a vampire, thanks to lost technology.

"Who are you?"

The two halberds clanked their weapons together, blocking his way.

The tall body of the priest sprang forward with astonishing speed; he ducked and rolled into the room.

"Oh, the bungler?" Leon murmured.

"Father Nightroad?" Tres asked.

Abel had no time to look at them.

Within that magnificent hall, a few dozen guards protected three important people: the Pope, dressed in white; a cardinal, dressed in scarlet; and the archbishop, who wore black. The archbishop grasped the rope of the huge bell, which had been placed very high in the belfry.

The archbishop turned around to look at the trespasser, but he immediately faced forward again. Abel didn't miss the strength with which the archbishop's hand gripped that rope.

"Sheesh!"

There was no time to hesitate. Abel gripped an old-fashioned percussion revolver in his hand. On seeing the gun, one of the guards shouted, "Get out, fool!"

The halberd swung down his ax, gouging the floor. Abel jumped sideways, fixing his aim at the slender rope. He simultaneously

landed and fired.

In the next instant, a high-pitched, metallic sound echoed.

Between the silver-haired priest and the bell, a shadow stood. The man's features were hidden by a mask, which covered his whole face. Although it was early summer, he was wrapped in monastic garb from head to foot. He grasped two straight swords, crossing them over his chest. Abel's bullet was stuck between the two swords.

Suddenly, another shadow stood next to Abel. The mask hid the person's face, but Abel sensed it was a woman, judging by the shape of the body underneath the ash-colored monastic garb. The slender needles grasped in her fingers pressed against Abel's neck.

"Inquisitors!" Leon hollered hoarsely. He revolved his chakram on the tips of his fingers. For some reason, he was twitching. The halberd guards were silent, as if bewildered by the sight of all these Vatican employees going after one another.

Working directly for the Ministry of Doctrine, inquisitors were holy warriors who exterminated all enemies of the creed and faith. They were the fangs of the church—the most powerful destroyers in the Vatican.

"Thank you, Brother Jacob, Sister Simone. You may leave," said Francesco.

As soon as the two monks bowed to their master and left, Francesco walked up to Abel, who stood like a statue. Violent anger blazed in the cardinal's eyes as he gazed at the silver-haired priest.

Meanwhile, Abel didn't move a muscle—he couldn't. Two slender needles were stuck in his neck. Losing all his voluntary muscle movement, his young body was frozen helplessly.

"I've seen your face somewhere before—you're an AX agent. Now, what does this mean, Caterina? Explain!" Francesco glared at his pale, beautiful half-sister, who had just run into the room. She paused, catching her breath at the door.

"I'm certain this man is your subordinate. You can't be trying to assassinate our uncle."

"The Duchess of Milan has nothing to do with this man," said a voice that lacked any intonation. "That man, Abel Nightroad, tendered his resignation from the Ministry of State at eighteen hundred fifty-four today."

"Hey, Tres!"

Ignoring the way Leon was tugging on his sleeve, Gunslinger continued to intercede between the siblings. Like a loyal hound protecting its mistress, he stood in front of Caterina to shield her from the brunt of Francesco's sharp gaze. "Based on employment regulation article three, paragraph four, as well as article eight, the Minister of Foreign Affairs has no relationship whatsoever with that man. The two are completely unrelated."

"Very well." Francesco stared into Tres' emotionless eyes; before long, he bowed his head. "We will arrest that man. If he is truly unconnected to you, Caterina, then you will have no objection?"

"But—"

"But what?"

Caterina lowered her gaze. "No, as you wish."

Francesco snorted slightly, gesturing to the guards waiting behind him. "Lock this one up. When this is over, we'll thoroughly investigate the matter—I'll know if there's any relationship between this man and the Ministry of State. I'm very sorry, Uncle. What a ridiculous blunder."

"No, don't worry about it, either of you." Alfonso's eyes were round with shock, but he managed to squeeze out the words. "Urn, I don't know what just happened, but perhaps we should continue the benediction?"

"Of course."

"Wait, Uncle." Caterina's white hand grasped Alfonso's wrist as he

reached for the rope. Her eyes bore into her uncle's face. "Please, discontinue the benediction for now."

"Caterina . . . you still . . . such nonsense!" Francesco worked himself into a rage; Caterina refused to so much as flinch, though.

Shifting her gaze from her uncle to her brother and finally to the bell over her head, she turned around. The guards were about to pull the priest out of the room. She wordlessly nodded to Abel, looking into his blue eyes, which were trying to communicate something to her.

"Uncle Alfonso, I do not mean to distrust you in the least; however, may I not inspect this bell? I'm afraid there may be something dangerous built into it."

"Caterina, are you mad?" her older brother barked.

"Please wait, Francesco." It was Alfonso who checked the growling cardinal. "In the end, Caterina, you trust your subordinate more than me, more than your own uncle?"

"I'm very sorry, Uncle," she replied, sad but resolute. "I trust my subordinate's judgment."

"Understood. Still, it pains me to put you to the trouble of investigating." Her uncle's hand was unexpectedly strong as he removed himself from her grip. "Here and now, I will make clear my innocence."

There was no time for Caterina to stop him. Alfonso pulled the rope with unimaginable speed.

The clear sound of a bell rang down from high above. It sounded like the voice of a beautiful, cursed angel. Caterina involuntarily closed her eyes, imagining Abel's face twisting desperately.

The bell went on ringing for several seconds. Caterina's luxurious hair shook as the belfry faintly vibrated with noise.

That was all. There were no sounds of buildings crumbling or people screaming.

When she opened her eyes, she saw Alfonso's sad face. "Is your mind at ease, Niece?"

V

Caterina is under house arrest in the Pope's palace, Abel is in the dungeon, and the two of you came back? Have you no shame?" the holographic nun shouted from the center of Caterina's empty desk. Her image flickered repeatedly as she shook her head, looking sad. "What unreliable people you are! Ah, poor Caterina. If only I could be with her."

"There's nothing anybody could do in that place," the large priest lazing on the guest sofa answered despondently. He groaned sulkily. "I'm just a weak pretty boy, right? And then there's this pistol-user over here. The two of us can't fight a war all by ourselves."

"I have no intention to perform combat actions for an outsider." Tres' voice, which was colder than usual, made Leon think of a frosted sword. "If not for his temporary transfer request, I would have erased Nightroad with my own hands."

"That's . . ." For an instant, the nun flinched as if she were afraid. "Isn't Abel your comrade? Aren't you being a little harsh?"

"Negative, Iron Maiden." Gunslinger was leafing through a thick file that he'd brought into the office; he didn't look at her as he spoke. "Nightroad refused to do his duty; moreover, he caused profound harm to his superior. He merits deletion."

"I won't have that kind of talk!"

"Well, calm down, both of you." Leon pushed off the sofa, forcing his way between his two coworkers. He went to the window. "This is no time to quarrel, is it? As for that bungling priest . . . this time, I sincerely pray that he rests in peace."

"He's not dead!"

Leon shrugged. "Never mind what happens to him. What are we

actually going to do? With the Duchess of Milan sequestered in the palace, we've been driven into a corner. Moreover, we're being watched."

Through the cracks in the blinds, Dandelion looked down at the street and gave a wicked smile. The coach parked on the corner belonged to the city police. The guards lurking on the roof of the building next door probably worked for the Carabinieri or the Ministry of Inquisition.

"This is the VIP treatment. Should we try asking them for room service?"

"Our followers — huh?" Kate's brows furrowed. "Telegram coming from outside. This is an emergency message. Oh, and I'm so busy already!" she grumbled before disappearing.

"She's a restless one. So, Tres, what have you been reading?"

"It's the record of investigation into the Archbishop of Cologne's jurisdiction. It was supplied by intel." In mere seconds, Tres scanned a file the size of a dictionary, accumulating a heap of material in front of him. "I'm analyzing the actions of Archbishop Alfonso over the last five years."

"Alfonso. Isn't that old man on the level? Didn't you see him a little while ago, too? What harm could he do?"

"Affirmative. However, Crusnik had reason to suspect him. He had to have some kind of basis for that suspicion. What are you laughing at, Dandelion?"

Leon finished chuckling. "It's just . . . after everything, you trust him. You're a good guy."

"Negative. I'm incapable of understanding. Request you re-input."

"Don't feel awkward."

"Feel awkward? I'm incapable of understanding. Re-input."

The nun suddenly came back in the middle of the room. "It's an

emergency!" She almost thrust her hologram image into Leon's opened shirt. Turning pale, she threw her head back and shrieked at her clumsiness.

"Rude, aren't you? Do you hate men with chest hair that much?"

"W-wait a minute, the sight is making me nauseated." Kate paused. "Ah, no, this is no time to be talking about such stupidity!"

"How is my chest hair stupid?"

"Shut up already! A message from Gypsy Queen just came from Barcelona! They've completed the recovery of Sister Noelle's body, but—"

"Is there a problem?"

As if in answer to Tres' question, a scrap of paper appeared in Kate's hand. "This is the drawing that Noelle grasped just before she died."

The three-dimensional drawing spread out inside the hologram was of a certain building. Every child in Rome could recognize it. Actually, Leon and Tres had been there recently.

"Isn't this the San Pietro Cathedral? What's this all about?"

"Please, look carefully here. Don't you think something's wrong? Right in the middle of this plaza . . ."

"Here, you—huh? What is this?" Leon's eyebrows shot up as he peered into the nun's hand.

Tres glanced at the same thing; then, he turned to Kate. "Confirmation needed. Iron Maiden, this certainly was in Barcelona, wasn't it?"

"Yes!"

"If so . . ." Gunslinger stood up, his blue eyes flashing ominously. "The Duchess of Milan and Crusnik have been drawn into a trap."

Belvedere Palace was a tasteful baroque building located inside the Vatican. Adjoining a museum that contained numerous masterpieces, it was used chiefly as lodgings for the common lords who visited as guests of the Pope.

In one of its luxurious private rooms, Francesco paced back and forth, sighing. "I am very sorry about tonight, Uncle. It was due to our ineptitude." The cardinal, who rarely showed emotion, had hung his head low all night.

"It's over already, Nephew." Alfonso was all forgiveness. "It was my unworthiness that caused my niece to suspect me. Please, don't blame Caterina."

"I won't concede that. Our only uncle, she insulted—"

"Yes, your only uncle. You saying that is enough for me." Shaking his head, Alfonso placed a wrinkled hand on his nephew's shoulder. "We are family, so please treat Caterina leniently. Since she was a child, she always had a strong sense of responsibility. This time she just carried it too far."

"I can't promise it for certain, but . . ." The wrinkles carved between Francesco's eyebrows disappeared. "I'll tell my sister that you said so, Uncle."

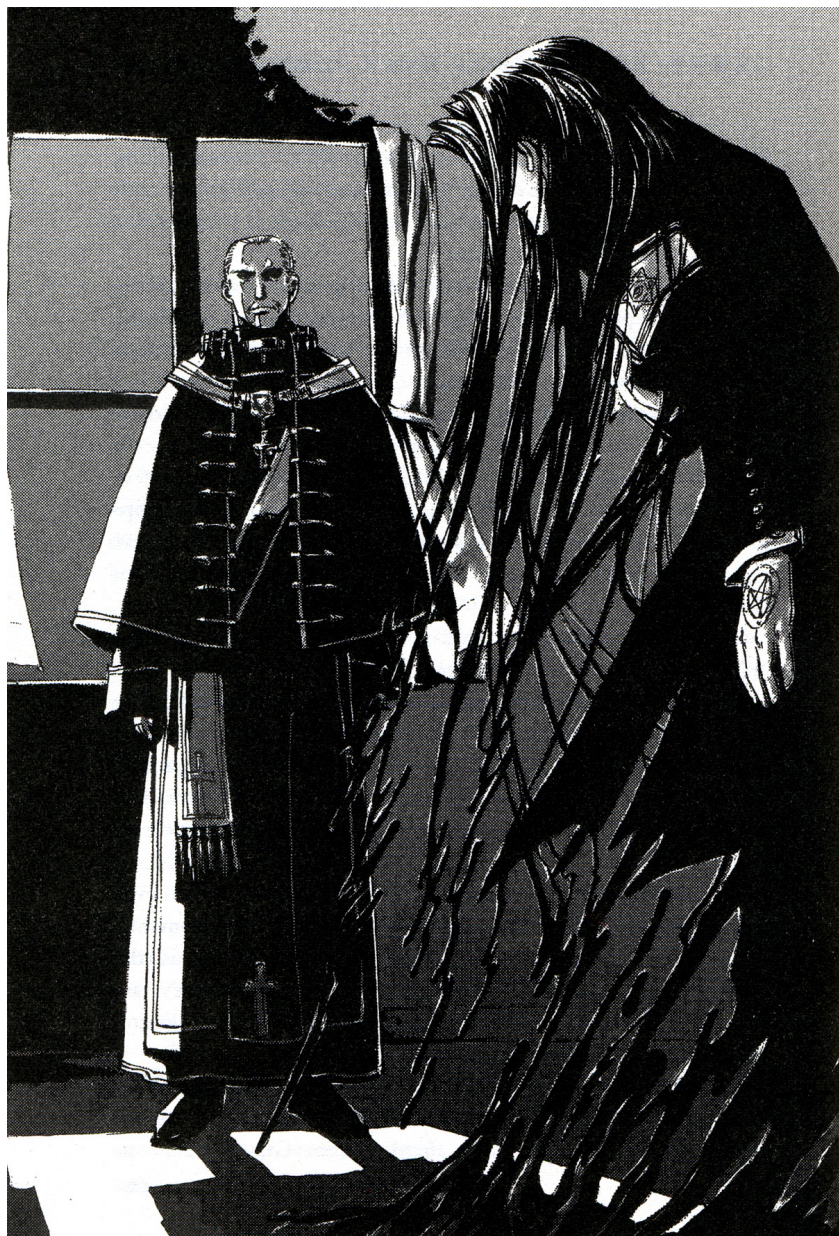
"Please do."

The great cardinal bowed and left.

Alfonso stood by the window for a little while. His eyes still gentle, he looked out into the night. "Your only uncle, eh?" Suddenly, his lips broke into thin smile. "You betrayed your only uncle! Are you coming, Mager?"

"Ja." Alfonso's shadow moved across the carpet. It writhed like a living person, rising, growing thicker. When it stood, pulling lines

of blackness to its center, the shadow changed into a man with long black hair. "Isaac Fernand von Kampfer, at your service. What do you require, Your Grace?"



Despite such a strange spectacle. Alfonso didn't bat an eyelash. In fact, his expression was haughty. As he gazed down at Wizard, Alfonso looked completely different from the man he had been with his nephew a short while ago.

"Kampfer, it was right to use a dummy as you proposed. Indeed, Caterina has good subordinates. Stay alert."

"The priest has been thrown in jail. He cannot interfere with Your Grace." Kampfer's tone was respectful. His thin lips stretched in a clever smile as he spoke with a slight Germanic accent. "Nobody can stop tomorrow's operation—not even God."

Alfonso narrowed his eyes as he looked out the window. "Five years was a long time to wait."

The cathedral and the plaza, enclosed by pillared halls, were well lit. In the center of the plaza, the huge obelisk that pierced the night sky and the chain of dazzling gas lamps that fanned around it resembled a rosary of diamonds laid out on black velvet. This metropolis never slept. The sounds of banquets and parties rode on the night breeze.

"The city is as beautiful as ever. The city is as polluted as ever. The people are polluted by idolization. The church is weakened by comfort. The cardinals are accustomed to laziness. The unworthy children who shame my great brother, Gregorio—they are responsible for this! The world is too difficult for them to control properly!"

Quietly, but with cruel candor, Kampfer pointed out: "Five years ago, the cardinals betrayed Your Grace, siding with those squabbling siblings. They were afraid of Your Grace, II Furioso. They knew that if Your Grace were to succeed to Pope, they would be expunged. They are shrewd."

"All that ends today. Both my enemies and this Babylon will disappear soon. Nobody can escape the Vineam Domini—the iron hammer of God! I will build a new fortress in my town, one devoted to God."

His plans were in place. The preparations to move the capitol to Cologne were eighty percent complete. In addition, the list of church workers who would be appointed new cardinals was full. All of them were true believers, people who adhered to righteousness. They would swear loyalty to the new Pope and bring about God's country on Earth. As long as they and their rightful ruler existed, the Vatican would be indestructible—even if Rome should disappear.

"Wicked Babylon . . . this city should be destroyed in the name of God and righteousness," Il Furioso whispered to Rome and the people living there.

VI

It was ten until five in the morning and all was quiet in the Via Triton neighborhood of Rome. Near the center of the holy capitol, this area held administrative offices for several governments. This close to dawn, the streets were empty except for the large, ash-colored armored vehicles.

"How far is it to headquarters, Master Sergeant?"

"About ten minutes, Lieutenant Montesecco." Pursing his lips at the driver's reply, Special Police Lieutenant Jiroramo Montesecco faced forward. In the seat ahead of him, wedged between six special policemen, their only prisoner sat quietly.

"Oh dear, isn't it a terribly unfair story, Father? When I was summoned to the Pope's palace in the middle of the night, I didn't expect I'd be ordered to take a priest to HQ. What a bothersome waste of time." Neurotically opening and closing the cap of his fountain pen, the lieutenant laughed. However, Abel didn't move or tug at his restraints; he merely drooped his head.

Montesecco violently grabbed his silver-blond hair. "Now then, Father Nightroad, can't I get you to stop being stubborn?"

The gangly priest groaned in pain. His lip was deeply split. As Abel gently wiped away the blood from his mouth, Montesecco repeated his question for the nineteenth time that night.

"Father Nightroad, you disturbed the benediction ceremony on the orders of your superior, Cardinal Sforza, right? You fired your gun at Archbishop d'Este, right?"

"N-no . . . you're wrong. . . ." His voice seemed to leak out of him. "I have nothing to do with Caterina. We have absolutely no relationship!"

The priest's body bent backward as if an electric current were flowing through it. His back cracked as if something were biting into his spine.

"I'm at a loss, Father. If I can't get you to tell the truth, it will be a terrible problem for both of us."

Blood smeared over Abel's right pinky finger. Montesecco had peeled off Abel's fingernail. He laid the broken nail on his pen tip, and then he licked his lips.

"Truth be told, I don't hate doing this kind of thing; if I have to take off the remaining nine fingernails, though, I'm going to get fed up with you. Therefore, confess at once, Father!"

Montesecco repeatedly struck Abel, smashing the priest's face against the window. Not caring that the fortified glass creaked, he pumped his thick arms into Abel as if hitting bread dough.

"Damn you! You were following Caterina's orders! Ah? You did it, didn't you?"

Abel's cries were pathetic enough to make the other policemen avert their eyes. Stopping eventually, the special police lieutenant let go his prey. Abel's bloodstained body went limp.

"Bah, you're a stubborn rascal. Well, fine, when we get to HQ, I can interrogate you thoroughly—whoa!"

Montesecco, who'd loosened his necktie, staggered hard as the vehicle suddenly braked to a stop. He barely managed to hold his ground.

"Idiot! What are you doing?" The master sergeant in the driver's seat leaned forward and shouted.

A single truck occupied the narrow curve ahead.

"Oh, sorry about this, senor," said a large man in an insolent, mocking tone. Dressed in a gaudy, primary-colored shirt and tinted sunglasses, he had the air of a gypsy about him, yet he approached the convoy vehicle with a strangely affable smile. "Well, I'd like to

tell you we'll be out of your way in a moment. However, we're completely out of gas. Senor, if it's all right, won't you bless us with a little gasoline?"

"What'll we do, Lieutenant?"

Montesecco clucked his tongue. "It can't be helped. Master Sergeant, assist them."

"Yes, sir." The heavily built master sergeant got out of the vehicle. "Well, how much do you need?"

The large stranger kept smiling at them, not at all intimidated by the police. "How about all that you've got?"

"Stop joking, open your tank."

"That's not a joke, this is." The stranger's huge arm wrapped around the master sergeant's neck. Mumbling, the officer kicked out his feet into mid-air.

"Don't move. If you don't want this man's neck broken, the rest of you should get out of the vehicle."

The special policemen reflexively put their hands to their hips. The master sergeant's face was beginning to turn an unpleasant color.

"Get out quickly. Or do you want to increase the number of joints in your precious subordinate's neck?"

"Hah, stupid." Glaring at the insolent giant, Montesecco smirked. "I don't know where you're from, you dunce, but you're a fool to pick a quarrel with the Carabinieri. Prepare to fire!"

The bulletproof glass windows opened wide. At the same time, the muzzles of machine pistols lifted.

With an unwavering smile, the giant skillfully ducked. "It's not good to be short-tempered. You may regret it later."

"Regret? I regret nothing. I have no use for blockheads who get caught by robbers. Fire!" Montesecco's hand lowered. "Gah!"

Seven gunshots reverberated outside the vehicle.

Out of the darkness, bullets shot through the policemen's shoulders with remarkable precision. The police let their weapons fall as they clutched their shoulders in agony.

"Clear. Delete zero, down seven. Rewriting tactical thoughts from assault mode to search mode."

A small young man walked out of the shadows. Mirrored sunglasses hid his expressionless face; smoke rose from the pistols in both his hands.



The larger man gently lowered the master sergeant locked in his arms. He heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I warned you that you'd regret it. Let's hurry, Gunslinger. There's no time."

"Affirmative." Tres pointed at the convoy vehicle's hatch. With a twist of his wrist, he casually wrenched off the steel door as if it were made of paper. Ignoring the policemen lying on the floor, Tres immediately knelt next to Abel.

"Are you conscious, Father Nightroad?"

"H-hey . . . Tres. I'm . . . sorry you're always . . . getting me out . . . of trouble. ..."

"I recommend you be silent." AX Agent Father Tres Iqus glanced at the fountain pen that had fallen to the floor and at Abel's bloody finger, but he displayed no emotion upon discovering evidence of Abel's torture.

Tres' glass eyes caught sight of the special police lieutenant trying to pick up his pistol. By the time the man flinched, it was already too late. Tres' nimble fingers grasped the sadist's hand, gun and all.

The strength of Tres' grip crushed Montesecco's hand to powder. Faster than the lieutenant could scream, Tres' other hand clutched the man's head, thrusting it against the vehicle's side door before he could shriek. His nasal bone caved in, sinking almost an inch into his face.

After that, Tres tore off his comrade's handcuffs, his expression perfectly calm. "We're moving out. Can you walk?"

"Y-yes. What in the world happened? Why are you bothering to rescue me?"

Leon answered, "They found Noelle's corpse—along with the drawing she discovered." He helped Abel to his feet. "Abel, your intuition was partially correct. Noelle did have a drawing of San Pietro Cathedral. An obelisk was standing in its plaza. Its location, size, and design were perfectly accurate."

"So, what? Oh, wait a minute. I'm certain that obelisk is..." The day before yesterday, Archbishop d'Este had donated an obelisk; it had been erected in the plaza. Until two days ago, nobody knew of its existence, except for the archbishop and those who had built it.

"In the end, Barrie also had a hand in the obelisk's construction. Silent Noise is inside it!" Abel said.

"Affirmative," Tres said coldly, picking up the special polices' badges and IDs. "We must hurry to the papal palace. You and Father Garcia destroy the obelisk. I will join the Duchess of Milan."

"All right, let's go!" Leon whistled, clapping his meaty palms together and jumping down from the convoy vehicle. Suddenly, he stopped.

"What's the matter, Leon?"

"Halt!" Leon sniffed the air; then, he grasped Abel's shoulders with frightful strength.

"Eh?"

A white light flashed through the darkness.

A deafening explosion thundered. The truck in front of them burst into golden flames. After tracing an arc of fire in the night sky, it struck the ground and exploded.

The priests covered their heads.

"Wh-what?"

A dazzling light shone in the window of the building directly in front of them. A uniformed group of armed soldiers ran between the brightly shining floodlights.

"Carabinieri!"

"That's not all. We've got bigger trouble," Leon growled.

Among the special policemen stationed on the roof, ash-colored

shadows peered down at them: One was a giant who held a two-handed straight sword, and the other was a woman with small needles in her fingertips.

Leon rolled up his sleeves. "Two inquisitors and a company of special police. It looks as though they'd like to help us spend our free time."

"Negative. Being confined here is undesirable. I'll suppress them. You two go ahead."

"Please wait a minute, Tres!" Abel hurriedly called to his comrade. "Strong as you are, you will be hard-pressed to match two inquisitors. . . ."

"No problem." Gunslinger showed no sign of fright as he faced down an entire police squadron of almost one hundred men. Tres added in an icy voice, "Once I suppress them, I will join you. Until then, Father Nightroad, you attack the guards imprisoning the Duchess of Milan. Father Garcia, you destroy that obelisk."

"Understood. But I wonder . . ." Leon wrenched off his sunglasses and grinned mischievously. "Aren't you really asking me to leave Noelle's revenge to Abel? Well, aren't you a nice guy?"

"Negative. I merely have calculated the most efficient distribution of battle strength. You don't have time to waste on talking; move quickly, Dandelion." Tres drew two handguns. The agitated special police squadron hefted their guns, but not a speck of fear showed on Gunslinger's face. "Rewrite resident tactical thoughts from search mode to genocide mode. Combat open."

VII

"You are Peter, and on this rock I will found my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." The San Pietro Cathedral, built on the gravesite of Saint Peter, who was Christ's first disciple and the very first Pope, resembled a huge gravestone.

Laid to rest there were many famous papal leaders: before the Armageddon, Johannes Paulo II, who fought against communism, a political doctrine based on revolutionary Marxian socialism, which was adopted by half the countries of the world; as well as Innocentius XVI, who was said to have been martyred during the Dark Ages, when the war with vampires began; not to mention Sylvester XIX, who led the eleventh crusade. Most of the successive generations of Popes were at peace in the underground tombs. Large enough to rival any cathedral on Earth, the underground church, furnished with a ceiling nearly ninety feet high, was divided into dozens of rooms. Each Pope's gravesite had a sarcophagus and a tombstone.

Five years ago, Pope Gregorio's grave was constructed, using extremely magnificent decoration, in accordance with all the wonderful achievements he'd made during his lifetime. Now, Caterina stood before the small mountain that was her father's grave marker, silent.

In truth, she hadn't harbored familial feelings toward that man. Ten years ago, she'd come from Milan to Rome; she was fourteen years old at that time. During the last five years up until Gregorio's death, they rarely had spoken to each other.

What about my father? Had he held affection for the daughter that one of his many lovers had borne? Although . . . it doesn't matter now.

"Forgive me for keeping you waiting, Caterina. Sorry for summoning you so early in the morning." A broken voice interrupted her silly thoughts. The corridor's door opened slightly

and closed immediately after.

Caterina respectfully bowed her head. "I apologize for last night, Your Grace."

"Please, don't be so formal, my niece. We're the only ones here." Alfonso smiled generously as he took Caterina's hand. "Sorry for summoning you so suddenly. Haven't you rested yet?"

"No, I ... never mind that, Uncle. Are you all right?"

It was ten minutes before dawn. Although she was under house arrest and therefore couldn't go, Alfonso should attend the morning mass. She wondered what his motive was in summoning her now.

"All the messenger told me was that you wanted to speak to me confidentially. What could you want of me, Uncle?"

"My niece, what do you think of the current Vatican?"

"Well, if you ask me that ..." Caterina knitted her eyebrows, not committing to an answer. She couldn't guess what was on her uncle's mind. Why would he want to gossip with his imprisoned niece at a time like this? She was at a loss for words, which was a rare thing.

Finally, she said, "The five years since the former Pope died have passed without any serious errors, but what of it?"

"Without any serious errors'? Do you really think so?" Alfonso looked up at the tombstone overhead. Thanks to the complex air conditioning system, the underground church's temperature seldom rose above forty degrees Fahrenheit. As the Archbishop of Cologne growled his harsh opinions, his breath puffed out in white clouds. "Cologne is a remote place, but rumors of Rome's bad reputation reach me there, as well. They say that the church workers are morally corrupt, that the church is flattered by gifts and bribes from the common lords, and that the Pope—who should be God's representative on Earth—is little more than a puppet to his older brother and sister."

"Uncle!" Caterina interrupted the archbishop's declaration with a

sharp rebuke. "Uncle—no, I mean Archbishop d'Este. Your opinion is impious. Please, be silent."

"Niece . . . Caterina . . ." His curved back suddenly straightened, and the old vigor that once belonged to Il Furioso now returned to his voice. "I'm buying your brain, Caterina. It's too precious to let it rot under a leader like Alessandro. If I add your wits to my ideals, what could be more heartening? How about it, Caterina? Won't you come with me? By all means, I want you to exert your powers and participate in our new Vatican."

"New Vatican?" What is he saying?

Alfonso's face was sincerity itself as he stared at her stumped expression. "Caterina, come with me. Let's destroy this rotten Vatican and build a new world together. By all means, I want you to take part in the new order I'm going to establish."

These were the rash remarks of a madman. Caterina ought to have laughed at him and then summoned a guard. Stunned, she simply stared, pale and frozen, as her uncle fervidly told her his deluded notions.

She noticed his shadow was pulsating. The strangely thick, dark form now stood up, drawing black lines around it. It reminded her of an animated corpse, rising out of a pitch-black swamp.

A grotesque swarm of noise and shadowed figures filled the graveyard. Caterina froze at the memory of such a sound. "Just as in Venice? Uncle, you couldn't have! You're not in league with the Orden?"

"Your subordinates are quite superb, Caterina. Last night, I was scared stiff by what they might have discovered."

The eyeless faces of the shadow demons known as Schatten Cohort turned toward Caterina, looking fiercely hungry.

Watching the grotesque demons surround them, the archbishop was very laid back. "I will win at last. *Ignē natura renovatur Integra*—we will renovate the world with our flames. The history of this

detestable Babylon will end at dawn. This city's skeleton will become the foundation for the world I'm planning."

"Uncle, do you know what you're doing?" Caterina shouted, instinctively edging backward. "To work with the Orden, of all people! To join forces with those terrorists! Have you made an enemy of the Vatican—of this entire world?"

"What of it?" His voice was free of doubt; in fact, Alfonso was proud of himself. "What kind of value is there to be found in this decadent world? People act like worms, the church is depraved, and the nobles do nothing but kill one another. Where is the sense in a woman as wise as you risking her life to protect such a world?"

She was so flustered that she couldn't immediately come up with a counter argument. After a moment's silence, Caterina decisively said, "Certainly, the world may be defiled. However . . ." Her beautiful face telegraphed her determination and confidence in what was right. With a look of scorn and pity, she mercilessly shouted at her uncle: "No matter how corrupt, it's our duty to protect this world—it's a sacred compact. I will carry out my duty!"

"I see. So be it." Alfonso snapped his fingers. The grotesque shadow demons raised their heads as if they suddenly had been released from chains.

"*Wer geboren werden will muß eine welt zerstören*—those who are born must destroy the world'—Hesse. It's a pity, Duchess of Milan."

Caterina stood her ground as the demons rushed at her. Staring at her impending death, she didn't so much as twitch. While her slender body was swallowed up by black shadows, her razor-sharp eyes sparkled as if she were a total stranger to the concept of defeat.

Abruptly, the doors blew apart.

"Nanomachine Crusnik 02 forty percent limited performance—authorized!"

Caterina's expression brightened. "Abel!"

The demons pressing in on the cardinal were blown away like dry

leaves. One looked like a lump of meat splattered against a wall; another smattered on the floor like a weird abstract painting.

"Are you all right, Caterina?" Amid the wind, noise, and screams, a tall man stood between the shadow demons and the beautiful cardinal. His crimson eyes surveyed the room as he raised his double-bladed scythe. "I made it in time. Are you hurt?"

"I'm unhurt. Be careful—my uncle . . ." Caterina shouted, secretly scolding herself for feeling such relief at the sight of Abel. "Capture Archbishop d'Este! He means to destroy Rome!"

"Your uncle?" Abel grimly gazed at the aging archbishop. "Caterina, that is not your uncle. How about if you stop pretending now?" He rotated his scythe through the stale air. The dark blade tore into the archbishop's body, stopping when it sliced into the stone wall.

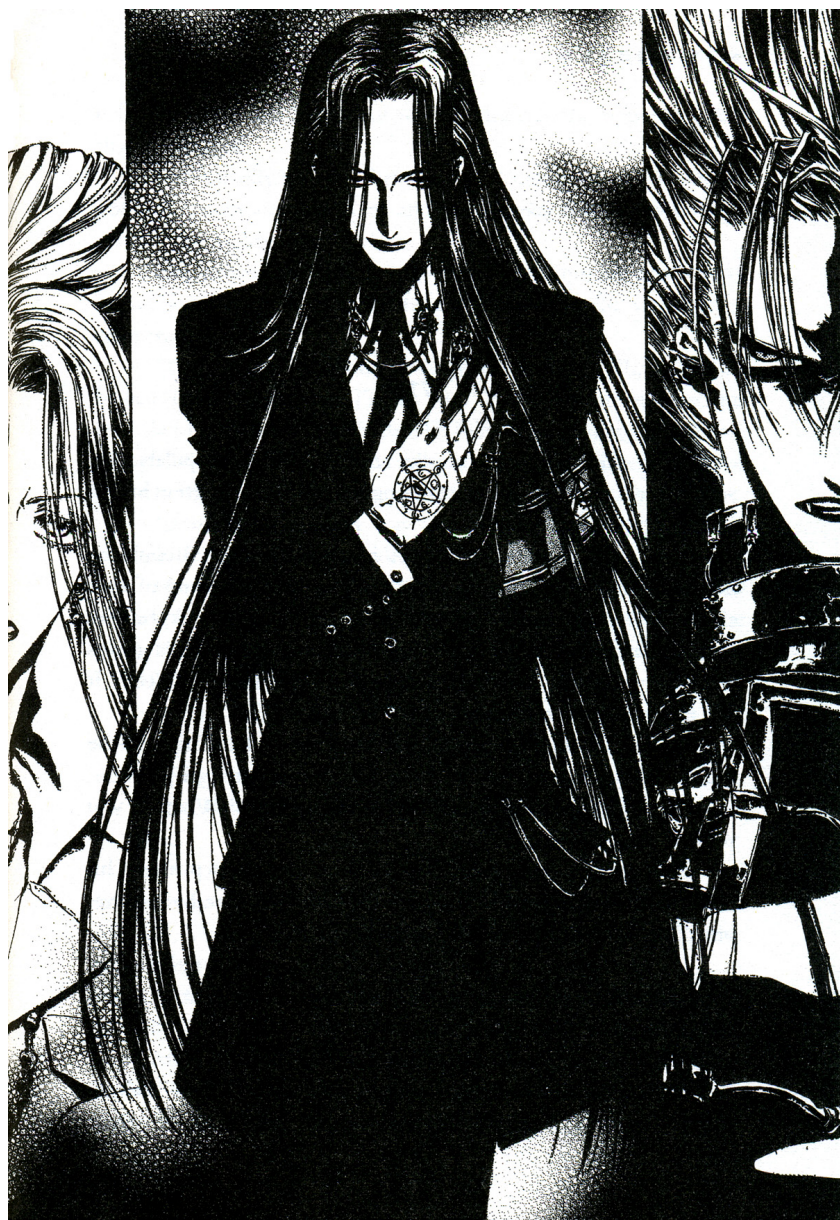
"Hmph. Did the game go a little too far?" asked a low, laughing voice.

The archbishop stood still. His trunk had been slashed in two; however, blood didn't gush from the penetrating wound. Instead, black sand energetically poured forth, piling on the floor. The archbishop's smiling face wilted as though his corpse were being deflated.

"Archbishop d'Este already has left Rome. He's busy preparing for the establishment of the new Vatican. Before the destruction of Rome, he wished me to try to speak with his niece. Now, you've heard his words."

Instead of Alfonso, a shadow spread across the floor. The darkness writhed and thickened; a man in a black suit stood there, his long black hair waving elegantly.

The man smiled pleasantly. "*Guten morgen*, both of you. Wizard of Machines Isaac Fernand von Kampf presents himself."



VIII

As dawn broke, the sky turned blue. The pillars that encircled the plaza cast long shadows, which grew longer with every passing moment.

The hum of countless voices inside the cathedral could be heard. The time for morning mass fast approached. A group of nuns crossed the plaza, each woman wearing a displeased expression. News of last night's scandal had spread, so the plaza entrance guards were being terribly strict during this mornings security checks. It put everyone in a bad mood.

"Hey!" someone gasped to the policemen checking over the visitors who stood in line. "Has Cardinal Medici arrived yet?"

"Yes. I'm certain he's already in the cathedral. What do you want of him, Lieutenant?"

The police cast suspicious looks at the man pushing his way through the crowd. The large, long-haired Carabinieri was breathing hard, as if he'd run a great distance.

"I'm Lieutenant Montesecco of the special police. The criminal who attacked the archbishop confessed. I have to report to His Eminence immediately. Let me through there!"

"Excuse me, do you have proof of permission?"

"Idiot! Who can bother with a thing like that in such an urgent situation! If you get in the way, I'll protest to the upper echelons later!" the lieutenant roared. This had the opposite effect than he desired.

Traditionally, relations between the Carabinieri, who handled political crimes and terrorism, and the Guardia Romana, who were general city police, were bad.

The policeman's gaze hardened. "Regulations are regulations, so we can't let you pass. First, you must apply in writing for permission."

"That's what I'm telling you—there's no time! Eh, it can't be helped. It's top secret, but I'll tell you." The lieutenant gnashed his teeth, but he seemed to understand his folly in scolding the policeman, though, so he explained, "Don't tell the others, okay? Intelligence has come in that a bomb has been planted in this plaza."

"Bomb?" That word was whispered, yet it was still loud enough to make the surrounding police tense.

The lieutenant added, "The bomb was planted in that obelisk. I'll dismantle it. You all should evacuate the people in the plaza. However, please do it so as not to cause panic."

"Understood!"

Luckily, there weren't many people left in the plaza. Watching the police scatter, Leon—who was dressed in the Lieutenant's uniform—grinned.

"Yes, do your very best, gentlemen. Now then, I have to get to work."

He took a fist-sized lump of clay out of his pocket and embedded a clockwork-style fuse in it with practiced ease. Like a wild cat, he gracefully approached the obelisk and affixed the clay to its base.

"I don't know if it's a sound weapon or not, but it should be all right if I destroy it. We'll analyze it thoroughly later, hm?"

After he carefully set his device down, Leon knitted his brows. With the look of a predator that's spotted a trap, he peered down at the stone pavement below his feet.

"Am I imagining it?"

"Lieutenant!"

Leon instantly hid his makeshift bomb up his sleeve. When he turned around, he saw a policeman running toward him, panting.

"Lieutenant, would it be all right if I came with you to report to Cardinal Medici?"

"Ah, no." Of course it wasn't all right. Leon cleared his throat. What can I say to get out of this? A chill ran down his spine.

It was pure instinct that made him jump off the stone pavement. The policeman looked up, astonished to see a huge body flying through the air at inhuman speed. The next instant, the policeman's neck was broken. His corpse was dragged into the earth.

A black hole had opened in the stone pavement where Leon had been standing. Something had flown out of there, snapped the policeman's neck, and jumped back into the hole. It had snatched up the young man's dead body without making a sound. All that had transpired in one second.

"What trouble am I in now?" Leon landed on top of the obelisk. Something is underneath the stone pavement!

"What happened, Lieutenant?"

"Idiot, stay away!" By the time Leon shouted, it was too late.

The stone pavement split open. A creature flew out, bit the wide-eyed policeman's foot, and pulled the screaming man into the ground with unimaginable strength.

"What the hell is that?"

Cracks appeared in the pavement, spreading under the shocked policemen and the nuns who still hadn't evacuated. The creature moved with considerable speed whenever it was underground.

"Shit, this is bad."

From his position on the apex of the obelisk, Leon looked down at the unfolding scene and clucked his tongue. His exceptional vision had caught sight of what appeared to a normal person's eyes as a mere shadow.

Of all the days to be attacked by something like this . . .

Looking at the nuns, Leon said, "It can't be helped. I wouldn't sleep in peace if I were to abandon women in distress."

Stripping off the special police lieutenant's black-and-silver uniform, Leon muttered to himself. He jumped down on the pavement and grasped the bomb hidden up his sleeve.

"Hey! Here's your prey!"

The creature probably felt him touch the ground when he landed. The fissures in the stone paving stopped moving for a moment; then, the cracks splayed in another direction. Like a shark that detected the scent of blood, the creature rammed straight toward Leon.

"Come on, come on. Whoops!"

Leon sprang sideways. At his feet, the pavement suddenly split. A black shape flew out of the crack. A huge earthworm—its body as thick as a man's torso—opened its terrible jaws. It bared its bloodstained fangs and bit at the giant priest.



The sound of teeth snapping together echoed throughout the plaza. The earthworm—otherwise known as "the Gnome"—gnawed on Leon's balled-up uniform. It pulled itself into its hole with lightning speed.

Being attacked by something that swift was unpleasant. "Bye-bye, stupid earthworm." Leon courteously waved toward the hole.

Suddenly, the ground quaked and rumbled. Gnome's tunnel belched out white smoke.

"It's your fault for being so nasty. Remember that," Leon said, satisfied that his bomb had killed the beast. "Now then, I have to take care of this obelisk."

Leon walked up to the obelisk and started embedding fuses in the two bombs he'd kept stashed in his trouser pocket. He stopped short of kneeling.

"Hey, hey ... that can't be!" A cold sweat broke out on Leon's face.

One after another, more than ten fresh fissures appeared in the stone pavement.

IX

"**S**orry about Barcelona, Father Nightroad. How have you been since then?" Wizard asked politely. "The curtains have at last opened on our little stage. More than anything, Father, I want you to enjoy the show."

"My comrade is on his way to the plaza," Abel said, his eyes shining like rubies. The terrorist was already within striking distance. The scythe could pulverize his skull at any time. "Silent Noise will be dismantled at once. I'll arrest you afterward, and it will be over."

"Impossible, Father. Do you think we didn't anticipated such obstacles?" His dulcet voice could have calmed a death-row inmate right before his execution.

Abel and Caterina blanched.

"We've placed a guardian in the plaza. Your friend should be torn into pieces by now. Operation Silent Noise will be carried out as planned, as long as I don't stop it."

"Then, I'll make you stop it!"

The scythe flashed forward as Abel attacked Kampfer. Unfortunately, the scythe's black blade was deflected a good arm's length away from its prey as a strong electromagnetic field shot up: It was the Shield of Asmoday.

Abel rotated the scythe in his hands. The blade on the opposite end of the staff scraped along the floor before rushing at Kampfer's black shadow. Abel knew it took an insane amount of energy to create such a powerful shield. Kampfer couldn't use it for too long. If Abel didn't cease his attack, he could crack the force field.

Kampfer slowly raised both hands. "Ar-O-Go-Go-Ru-Abrao! I summon you, terrible Lord of Flames, Angel of Hostility . . ." Wizard

chanted.

The pentagrams on his hands gave off a cursed light. An unspeakably vile aura spread throughout the graveyard. It grew unbearably hot.

"Worthless one, evil one, despised one, wicked one, one who dwells in the insubstantial places of the soul, my heart knows the world through you."

Abel's jet-black scythe twirled once and stopped before Kampf's eyes. "I don't know what you intend, but this is the end!"

"Lord of the Exalted Darkness that you yourself produced, give me your flames. Come, Arrow of Belial."

The scythe that Abel had swung down was bleached pure white.

From out of thin air, a fireball hurled at Abel, throwing his body across the room. The wind blasted him around as if he were a toy, slamming his back into a wall.

"Abel!" Caterina's eyes widened.

The priest crouched on the floor. A large quantity of fresh blood from Abel's head wound was beginning to pool on the floor.

"Ah, you better not move him too much, dear Cardinal. The Arrow of Belial—my electromagnetic acceleration gun—has power equal to a battleship's main cannon. It's a wonder that his body is intact after that direct hit."

Caterina didn't hear Kampf's warning as she knelt next to Abel. She didn't notice that around both his arms, he'd wrapped a black mist, made out of the same sand that had previously imitated Alfonso.

"Abel! Abel, hang in there!"

"Run away, please, Caterina." The priest raised his bloodstained face. He had gone blind; he couldn't see his companion's face.

As far as Caterina knew, Abel was unstoppable once he transformed into Crusnik. To see him defeated so easily . . .

"Now then: I received two instructions from Archbishop d'Este—I mean, the new Pope." Wizard's tone held no pride or smugness as he spoke to the cowering pair. He was very businesslike. "The first one was to persuade you, Cardinal Sforza, to take part in the new Vatican."

The pentagrams on his hands lit up again. Simultaneously, his arms, which were clad in the swirling mist, aimed at Caterina's beautiful face.

"And the second instruction was to take your life if you refused. Your continued existence is likely to be undesirable to the new Vatican."

The next instant, the iron sand was electromagnetically accelerated and projected by a discharge of current against its own magnetic field.

As the tumbling current of light beamed out, Caterina involuntarily shut her eyes. Behind her eyelids, the world looked like it had been dyed blue. The sound of an intense blast struck her ears. Her eardrums ached from the change in air pressure. The scent of burnt hair clogged her nostrils. However, she didn't die.

"Abel?" Caterina raised her head to peer at the warm liquid that was trickling down on her head.

Abel stood like a statue, dripping blood on her face. He held her tightly to him. Abel's back was gouged wide open. His burnt skin split, and his white spine peeked out from his seared flesh. A vampire would have died immediately from such a wound, never mind a mere human.

"Oh ho. You're admirable, aren't you, Father?" Wizard glared at the priest who should've been dead. His voice sounded gloomy as he said, "It really is admirable, going to such lengths to protect your mistress. Can't I get you to stop uselessly struggling? It's a waste of time."

"No." A shredded voice rose up from the blood-smeared lump of flesh that continued to shield Caterina. "No ... I ... protect ... humans."

"Abel! Enough! Enough, already!" Caterina shouted, hitting the priest's chest with her clenched fist. "Never mind me! You should save yourself."

Kampfer seconded the cardinal's words. "It is as Her Eminence says, Father. You shouldn't do useless things. In the end, no matter what you try, the result won't be any different. Wasn't that proven in Barcelona?"

The instant he heard the name of that city, Abel's drooping head jerked up. His fingers tightened.

Whether he didn't see Abel's renewed vigor or he pretended not to notice, Kampfer's voice remained polite. "Yes, everything is the same as it was in Barcelona. Almost the entire city will be destroyed. Your superior, your comrades, and the people in this city will die. No matter what you do, it's useless. Because . . ." Wizard shut his mouth for a moment. In his shuttered expression, there was no lament for those who would die, nor was there any hint of contempt for those responsible for the destruction. After a pause that seemed to last for eternity, his lips stretched into an arched smile, and he said, "Because you fail to protect the ones you love."

Choking on his own blood, Abel's voice was hoarse as he shouted, "Nanomachine Crusnik 02 forty percent limited performance—authorized!"



X

Abel's horizontal blow broke through the Shield of Asmoday. If the Arrow of Belial in discharge mode hadn't substituted as a defensive wall, Kampfer's body would have been sliced in two.

Wizard was blown backward along with his electrified iron sand. He thudded into a gravestone; it toppled over, breaking a white marble Madonna statue to bits. A hanging cross smashed on the stone floor, kicking up a terrific amount of dust.

"Oh ho, this is surprising. You still have that much strength?" Kampfer casually stood up and peered through the clouds of dust. The slender shadow draped across the threshold probably was Caterina. She didn't budge, perhaps because she was unconscious. Where is the other one?

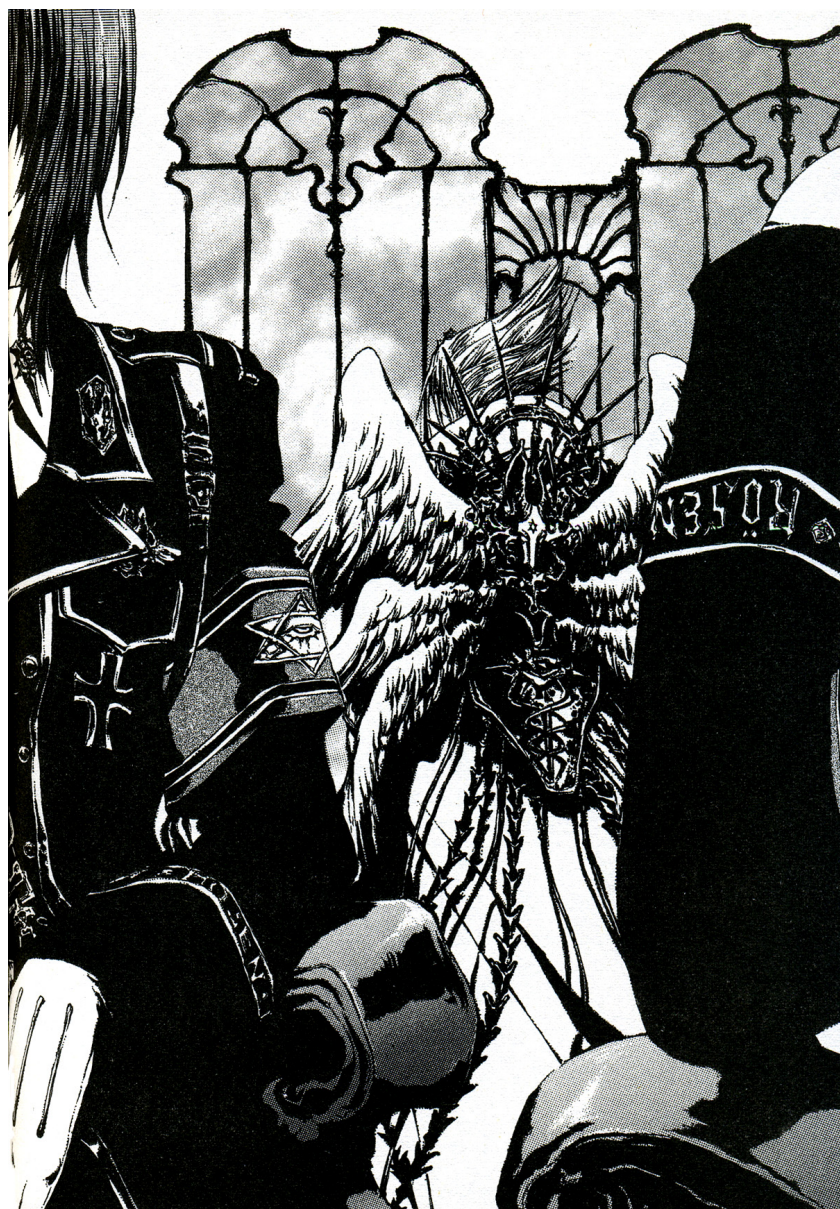
"Where are you looking?" asked a cold, inhuman voice somewhere above Wizard.

Kampfer reflexively raised his head. Countless marble angels that had been carved into the ceiling suddenly came flying at him. They were God's messengers, sculpted with a delicate touch, brandishing their white wings, praising the glory of heaven.

Among them was one fallen angel with flapping, jet-black wings and shining, red eyes. It was Abel. No, it was something that had been Abel.

"So, this is your true form?"

The priest's ruby eyes made him look as though he were crying tears of blood. Black wings almost the length of his body extended from the back of his torn cassock.



"Pleased to see you, Crusnik 02. We meet at last."

As if in answer to Kampfer's greeting, the fallen angel's wings spread -wide.

Each one of his feathers shone brightly, electrifying the atmosphere. A sinister light accompanied their glow. The tomb's lamps began to rupture, one after another. The frescoes' paint melted and vaporized.

"Megavolt organic electrical discharge. That's grand. However, it won't defeat me."

Whether he heard the ridicule in Wizard's words was unclear; regardless, Abel responded with an inhuman voice: "Die."

The next instant, a blue-white current snaked along the ground.

Kampfer spread the iron sand that had collected in his hands over his head. *I don't know how high the voltage he's wielding is, but as long as it's an electrical attack, this shield is unbeatable.*

A heartbeat later, the sword of Justice swung down upon the arrogant Wizard. "What!"

He thought his clothes had been torn; in actuality, his chest had been split open. The blow tossed his body several feet into the air. He crashed onto the floor, still unaware of what had happened to his body. A normal person would have broken all their bones and been turned into meat pudding.

"It's impossible to summarize the damages. What now?" Lying sideways in the center of a fissure, Kampfer looked up.

A barrier of iron dust stretched between his body and Abel's black wings, which were wrapped in pallid electric light. No matter what kind of attack Abel had used, it shouldn't have gotten through his defenses.

"No, there is just one attack that could work: electrical discharge cutoff. This is a spark-gap impact?" A faint tinge of admiration

appeared on Wizard's face.

A spark-gap impact is when the air becomes ionized thanks to a powerful electrical discharge occurring between two electrodes, which converge in the surrounding airspace. The strength of the shock depends on the scale of the electrical discharge; theoretically, it was possible to split the cathedral in two using such an attack. The monster looming over him seemed able to freely manipulate the concentration point of the discharge.

"Marvelous," Wizard praised, his dull eyes like those of a dead fish. "Really marvelous. I've never seen this much power from a Crusnik!" He let out a strained groan. An invisible blade swung down haphazardly, attacking his whole body. A nearby gravestone split apart as if a machine gun had blasted it. In the storm of the electric shock, amid the raging ionized atmosphere, a fist of hardened air mercilessly pounded Wizard's body, rending it apart.

Then, silence descended.

Is it all over? From underneath a mound of rubble, Kampf extended his hands as if to brush off the lumps of rock that had crushed his body. "Ugh!"

Something heavy mercilessly slammed down on his cracked chest. Eyes red as blood peered at him. Abel's wings had disappeared, but he still grasped the double-bladed scythe in his hand. The creature that had been Abel now glared at Wizard.

"Really marvelous." Kampf's voice was quiet as he gazed up at his impending doom. "You are a marvelous person, Abel. I am completely beaten. Well, kill me, then. You should take your revenge for that nun you liked so much."

Still silent, the creature raised his large scythe. The blades aimed for the crown of Kampf's head. Wizard knew he would be split in two. He watched the strength fill Abel's fingers as the priest clutched the scythe.

Nothing happened.

No growl split the air; no frenzied howl rang out. It was quiet. The only sound was something faintly shaking.

Kampfer looked up questioningly. A warmth seemed to spread to Abel's red eyes.

"A long time ago, I made a promise," the creature muttered painfully. "I won't kill anymore. I promised that."

"A promise?" Kampfer asked, bewildered by Abel's deep sorrow. "You say you promised?"

Abel trembled; dark circles were etched under his eyes. Strong emotions threatened to burst out of him. "Yes. I promised long ago not to kill, nor to let anyone die. I vowed to atone for my crimes."

Contrary to his words, Abel's arms struggled to swing the blades down toward Kampfer's head. His arms shook with the desire to kill Wizard. The monster ground his teeth, pulling his hands toward his chest.

"I won't kill anybody anymore. I won't kill. So, tell me! How do I stop that weapon? Tell me, please! I don't want to kill anybody else! I don't want to let anybody else die!"

Faint emotion danced across Wizard's clever face as he heard Abel's painful plea. He answered the priest in a voice that was infinitely kind: "Very well, let's talk." Gazing into Abel's red eyes, Kampfer carefully opened his mouth. "There's only one way to stop Silent Noise: You have to interrupt its control chip."

"Chip? Where is that?"

"It's here." Kampfer indicated his chest. Pale white skin, seemingly untouched by sunlight, was visible underneath his torn shirt. "Here, the control chip is inside me."

"What?" Abel wavered, confused. Inside him? That means . . . Refusing to avert his gaze from Abel's face, Wizard smiled. "Yes, the chip in my body always monitors my vital signs. When I die, the chip will stop its activity. You have to kill me to stop the control chip. Well, it's very simple, isn't it?"

Abel's eyes opened wide.

"You should kill me to stop the weapon."

Is he asking me to help him commit suicide?

Wizard sported an extremely satisfied smile, the way the devil would look when he handed a mortal man a pen to sign away his soul. "Well, what will you do? Me or Rome? Which one will you choose?"

"That's . . ." Abel shook so much that his scythe rattled.

If he saved the man before his eyes, Rome would be destroyed and tens of thousands of lives would be lost. He would have to kill this one man to save Rome. Whichever option he chose, his actions would break his promise to her! "There's no other way?"

"Nein. You're free to choose who will die—that's all that you can do."

Above their heads, the morning bell rang out. Dawn had come at last.

"Silent Noise will start when that bell finishes ringing three times."

Abel looked up in consternation. The bell rang a second time.

"Well, one more bell. What will you do, Abel?"

"I ... I ..." Abel panted as he looked down at Wizard.

Yes, if I kill this man here, everything will be settled.

Saving Rome and the beloved people who lived there was the only way he could repay his comrades' trust. Wizard was an abominable murderer. He'd taken countless lives until now, destroyed an entire city, and killed Noelle. What value did the life of a villain like this have? What reason was there to hesitate? It's right for me to take the life of this person on behalf of those I've loved before and those I love now. Yes, unmistakably right!

Then, I . . .

The instant he closed his eyes, an image appeared behind his eyelids. Was he thinking of the people he should protect? Or the people he failed to protect? Or else...

The third bell rang.

"It's time."

The huge scythe fell on Wizard's head.

XI

Somewhere far away, a bell was ringing. "Ugh." Caterina pushed herself up, coughing lightly. Holding her aching head, she gazed at the debris scattered around her.

"This is ...!"

The cardinal jumped up. *What happened to that terrorist? And Rome?*

"Abel!" Caterina shouted to the tall shadow standing next to a demolished gravestone. "Abel, are you okay? That man—what happened to the man from the Order?"

There was no answer. The priest's gaze was fixed upon the floor; he didn't blink.

Caterina gasped. "Abel, you . . . ?"

Abel didn't answer. His body was frozen in the act of swinging down his scythe.

The Wizard was lying at Abel's feet.

"My condolences, Cardinal Sforza," Kampfer said in a tranquil voice. "This is the end of Rome. Silent Noise has begun to operate. He couldn't decide." Wizard stood up. A thin scar ran along his cheek. Abel's blade was buried in the floor. "It's a shame, Father. Rome is finished. You stole a half million lives. Your promise has destroyed Rome."

"I?" Awed, Abel took one step backward. Staring at Wizard's face, he cried as if his heart had been crushed. "I killed everybody?"

"Yes, you've killed them." Wizard placed his mouth next to Abel's ear. He whispered clearly, as if carving his words into the priest's soul, "If you'd killed me, you would have saved everybody. You

hesitated to get your own hands dirty, though. Because of your promise, you couldn't kill me. Yes, your promise killed a large number of innocent people."

"Ah."

The huge scythe slipped from Abel's fingers, and the monster staggered farther backward. He covered his face with his hands.

One more step. With joy in his heart, Wizard said, "Why don't you acknowledge that you destroyed the people of Rome and killed your friends? You are the killer. Killing is your true nature. Yes, *you*."

"Hey, hey, don't go killing off all those people so easily, you long-haired jerk." Such a random, casual statement seemed very incongruous. "Is this bungling priest just going to sit there, listening to you? Sheesh. Then, I suppose I'll have to take care of you."

Caterina caught sight of the huge shadow standing in the door. Leon carried both the charred remains of some delicate machine and the severed head of the Gnome, which dripped golden liquid.

Father Leon Garcia de Asturias gave Caterina a thumbs-up, clumsily winking with one swollen eyelid. "I'm here now. Sorry to keep you waiting, Abel."

"Leon!" Abel beamed. *If Leon is here, then Silent Noise . . .* "A last-minute player on the scene?" For the first time that morning, the smile disappeared from Kampfer's face. He ground his teeth as he looked down at the broken machine in Leon's arm.

A faint tinge of irritation shone in his eyes. "I intended to give my toy to this poor actor over here. It seems I underestimated you a little."

"You long-haired jerk—you underestimated me considerably."

Kampfer lightly clucked his tongue as he watched Dandelion twirl the chakram on his fingers.

"The game has gone one step too far." Kampfer didn't have enough power left to use complicated sorcery. He'd also failed to destroy

Rome. "Indeed, I can't go back to Thurm empty-handed. Therefore, before I bid you farewell, I'll give you one souvenir."

Wizard muttered an incantation, and the pentagrams on his hands sparkled.

A Sylphide appeared. The translucent, artificial ghost whipped its tentacles at the two agents.

"What is this evil-looking thing?" Leon cried.

"Be careful! It's no use cutting the tentacles! The body—C-Caterina!" Abel's face froze in horror.

Wizard's form was sinking into his own shadow. He looked at Caterina, who stood in the doorway, watching the fight.

"I'm very sorry, Your Eminence. If I return empty-handed, my client won't be very understanding." Kampfer laughed, reaching out to Caterina, who didn't seem to notice what was happening. "I failed to get Rome; at least I'll return with Your Eminence's head."

Wizard's arms encircled the beautiful woman's neck. Suddenly, he was snapped backward and sent flying across the room.

A burst of fire blew off Kampfer's shoulders. Dark bullet holes drilled into his whole body, tearing off his arms. Eighteen large-caliber shells were fired from somewhere beyond the wall. The bullets pummeled into his body.

Only one person could perform such a stunt.

"Gunslinger!" Abel cried.

"Affirmative." Tres broke through the wall and then stood next to Caterina. "Damage report, Duchess of Milan." His clothes were torn, and his artificial skin was lacerated everywhere, but his handsome face was still devoid of emotion.

"Now it's three against one, but I'm in the best position to get him!" Sneering, Leon elegantly flung his chakram directly toward Wizard's neck.

The sound of bodily fluids gushing forth overlapped the noise of flesh ripping apart.

"What?" The giant priest stared, wide-eyed.

A small black shadow stood between Leon and Kampf. The chakram had bitten deeply into the shadow's arms. Apparently, Kampf had summoned a *Künstliche Swerg*, or artificial dwarf, known as a shadow demon.

Leon groaned in disappointment. "Hey, what kind of joke is this?"

Inside the graveyard, many shadows wavered, lurching back and forth. One had lost its head and one had been cut in two, but the rest of the artificial dwarves had begun to stand up together.

"Wizard, are you still alive?"

Kampf watched the shadow corpses rise. He heard the whisper in his ear, and he answered, "Puppeteer? Are you pulling these demons' strings?"

"You can't hold out long with three agents for opponents. If you're going to escape, please go quickly." The snickering voice grew distant.

Bullets and chakram rings struck out, loudly protesting the idea of Kampf's escape. The shadow zombies were being pulverized with overwhelmingly destructive force.

Kampf cast a curious glance at the tall priest.

Abel's eyes, which already had returned to the color of a winter lake, were staring fixedly at Kampf's face. Kampf saw relief and regret, resolution and doubt. Various conflicting emotions whirled in Abel's eyes.

"*'Nichts abgeschmackters find' ich auf der welt, ah einen teufel der verzweifelt*—There is nothing in this world so insipid as the devil in despair'—Goethe. Well, so be it. I'll have many other chances. Many, many, many," Wizard muttered, melting into the floor.

"All clear. Mission complete," Gunslinger said, executing the last shadow demon. The three priests and one cardinal were left standing among the corpses of the shadow demons; some sluggishly squirmed or twitched; all had long since lost their ability to fight.

"Crap. We let such a crucial prisoner escape? And I took the pains to come down here and fight," Leon complained.

"It's unavoidable. Reinforcement of the enemy's battle strength at the final stage was outside our conjecture. We were able to guarantee the Duchess of Milan's safety. We can be mostly satisfied with that result."

The priests' clothes were in tatters. They looked like veterans returning from a war.

"So, Rome is all right, Father Tres?"

"Beginning with His Holiness down to the high-ranking church workers ... casualties and structural damage within the city is zero. The objective is one hundred percent achieved."

"Good. Thank you very much, all three of you." Caterina sighed in relief, looking at the three priests with a rare fondness. Her gaze rested on Abel. "What's the matter, Abel?"

"Nothing ... I ..." Flustered, Abel shook his head.

Caterina, Tres, and Leon had been wounded all over their bodies, yet they still stood on their feet. Abel narrowed his eyes, dazzled by their courage. He ended up saying something unexpected. "I ... it's, um . . . I'm very happy."

"Happy? About what?" Caterina asked.

"Your meaning is unclear, Father Nighthead. Request re-input."

"Hey, what's the matter? Did you get hit on the head?" Leon wondered.

Abel both laughed and cried at the three people frowning at him.

"Don't do so much, Abel. Everybody's with you, including me. "

Abel ruminated over Noelle's words.

He opened his mouth again. "I can't say it very eloquently — after all is said and done, though, I'm glad I'm here."

His three companions were silent for a long while, abashed. After considerable time had passed, footsteps echoed outside the graveyard.

"Ah, oh no! When I came down here, I knocked out two or three palace guards!" Leon confessed.

"Affirmative. Me too."

Caterina sighed. "Dealing with all this is going to be complicated. For now, when we go outside, we have to make contact with Kate and demand that the Holy See of Cologne ensures Archbishop d'Este's safety."

They left the tomb more quickly than absolutely necessary.

"By the way, Father Leon ... I'll leave the explanation of the circumstances concerning the palace guards up to you. I will continue to scout the area," Tres said.

Leon pouted. "Wait a minute. That's somewhat unfair. Why do you always leave these things to me?"

As she followed her two subordinates out of the tomb, Caterina turned around. Abel was standing there, looking lost and alone.

"What's wrong, Abel? Come with me."

Abel looked up and replied, "Yes. I'll go with you."

After a long time had passed, Wizard returned to Thurm. When he spoke, his voice sounded somewhat cheerful: "Comrades, friends, lovers, it doesn't matter what you call them. Do you know what the most bitter thing for a person who depends on others is?"

"Of course." A young man sat on the sofa across from Kampfer. Moonlight shone through the curtains, illuminating the mischievous smile that played on his handsome face. "A romantic who depends on other people hates to lose his friends."

"You're wrong. It's when his friends *change*, Dietrich." The tip of Wizard's cigarillo burned with red light. Puffing out tobacco smoke, he smiled in satisfaction. "From this incident, I've seen his limits. I can manipulate his greatest strength into his greatest weakness."

"Indeed. I said I understood. You protected Archbishop d'Este, right, Isaac?"

"Yes, unlike Count Zagreb, I still can use Archbishop d'Este. If you like, in a little while, I can offer you an appointment in the new Vatican."

After the failure of Operation Silent Noise, the Vatican reached out to Cologne. AX's investigation had been severe, but it hadn't exceeded the predicted level of inconvenience. Actually, they had let Alfonso escape, despite the fact that he was the ringleader.

Pressing his cigarillo into an ashtray, Kampfer laughed. He calmly gazed at the shadow of the other person who stood by the window, unmoving.

"Well, I'm glad you're watching, Puppeteer. That priest believes in his own strength. But the time will come when they will point swords at themselves. Then, he'll be on our side. How about that, *mein herr*?"

The shadowed figure by the window didn't reply. Still silent, his golden, shining head simply turned to look at the two men. His handsome face stretched into a thin smile.

Side Story – Sling Blade

The rebels shall fall by the sword.

Their infants shall be dashed to pieces,

and their women with child shall be ripped up.

- Hosea 13:16

I

"The Vatican, our detestable enemy," said Thierry Darsus, the Count of Brussels. His voice echoed into the night, its timber refined with hundreds of years of age. A hint of dread flashed across the old vampire's deeply wrinkled face. He was dressed in black. The Methuselah held the main seat of Count Four, the crime syndicate that haunted the Four City Alliance's underground. He was certainly afraid of something.

"It was a pity about Carrel van der Verf and the Amsterdam brethren. However, I can't believe more than ten Methuselah were slaughtered by just one Terran. Honestly, I still can't believe it."

"Although it's a pity, it is an undeniable fact, Your Excellency," said Gie de Grandville, the Count of Bruges. He was dressed in white and spoke quietly. He pushed up his wire-rimmed glasses to hide his anxious expression. "According to eyewitness testimony, one priest alone butchered the Amsterdam brethren—probably in retribution for killing the church workers in Oude Kerk.

"Well, as for Carrel himself, I think he got what he deserved. This trouble started because that idiot killed a priest." It was Hans Memlink, the Count of Antwerp, who said this in a shrill voice. He stood between Gie and Darsus. This young, artistic Methuselah had not gotten along well with Carrel when he'd been alive. Hans wrinkled his nose, clearly not mourning the loss of his comrade.

"Really, when it comes to that idiot, he's still causing problems after his death! So, who's the guy who killed Carrel? Has he already returned to Rome?"

"It's unconfirmed. At present, Alliance police are following his trail, but nothing has been found of his whereabouts."

"The police, eh? Isn't it too heavy a load for them to carry?"

Memlink snorted. His slender fingers played with the rose tucked into the lapel of his crimson tuxedo. He gave an ear-splitting laugh. "Our opponent must have wonderful skills if he destroyed Amsterdam—however temporarily. Can he be caught by stupid fellows like the police?"

"Isn't saying 'stupid' going too far, Count of Antwerp?" a man protested. He was the one person among them who'd remained silent thus far. Ducked under unruly orange hair, his face, which was hard with anger, looked like that of a man in his thirties. With his chin thrust out like that, his features were stern and ugly. Despite this, his tall, muscular body was in good shape, and his demeanor was dignified and unassailable.

Glaring at the scarlet-clad vampire, the man spoke slightly louder, "In the first place, the trouble was started when a Methuselah stupidly murdered a priest in a church. I submit to you that we still are paying for it. I beg you not to forget that point."

"You want us to dwell on it? Isn't that presumptuous, Jan van Maylen?" Memlink asked in his nasal, alto voice. He bit off the petals of his rose. His long, curved fingernails eerily scraped together. "By whose influence was a third-class nobleman like you appointed Chief Inspector? I don't want you to forget that it was our favor that gave you such status—for the time being."

"I'm paying you more than enough in compensation!"

The confrontation was between three powerful Methuselah and one fragile human, but Four City Alliance Chief Inspector Jan van Maylen didn't flinch. He defiantly lifted his chin, glaring directly into Memlink's icy purple eyes. "Do you people have any idea how much trouble I take to cover up your crimes? Especially you, Count of Antwerp — the clean up after your 'artistic activity' causes me a lot of trouble! I'd like you to stop playing games in such poor taste!"

"P-p-poor taste? Hey, Maylen! How dare you — a filthy traitor — say such a thing?" Memlink's mood swings were famous among the Count Four. If this conversation hadn't been conducted by visiphone, the impertinent Terran would have been cut to ribbons by now. Baring his fangs, Memlink shouted in fury, "Who was it, ten

years ago, that came crying to us to steal the post of Chief Inspector from the Watteau family? I haven't forgotten that night, when *somebody* came begging, offering us inside information! And the commissioner's seat wasn't the only thing you stole from them. Your wife, that — "

"That's enough, Memlink. Now isn't the time for quarreling among ourselves."

Darsus checked his noisy comrade with his authoritative voice. Somewhat stumped, he turned back to Jan. "Chief Inspector, you, too, must settle down. I certainly understand your dissatisfaction. If the uproar over this incident becomes any more profound, though, the Alliance government will not turn a blind eye, I'm afraid. You should embark upon a regular investigation."

"If that happens, you won't just lose your post. Mister Maylen, we will share the same fate. For your own sake, hadn't you better quickly produce some kind of result?" Gie's grave voice calmed everyone.

Jan had to agree with his point, although grudgingly. "I understand that without being told. I promise I'll make every effort to investigate the priest; I will work without rest. As for you — please don't do anything conspicuous. Honestly, I can't handle any more disasters."

"Fine. If you discover news of the priest, please tell us at once. We want revenge for our brethren. If we don't deal with this ourselves, we'll lose face with our own kind. Well, how does this plan sound to the two of you?"

"Yes, no objections," Memlink said.

Gie murmured, "Do as you like."

Darsus gloomily nodded his agreement.

Memlink, whose "artistic activity" had been deprecated, kept his back turned and continued sulking, but he made no other comments.

Nodding conscientiously, the Methuselah wearing white turned back to the chief inspector. "Then, Commissioner, we will wait for good news. By all means, don't let him get away."

"Understood. If something happens, I'll make contact again."

As soon as the three vampires hung up, Jan violently ripped off the visor covering the top half of his face. He tossed it on the desk next to the visi-phone that the Count Four had given him.

"Monsters! Doing whatever they want!"

He clucked his tongue and kicked a chair. Stalking out to the terrace, he inhaled the scent of the ocean and sighed. A harbor where ships continuously came and went and a lively shopping district lined with narrow shops spread before him.

The city of Antwerp, occupying one corner of the Four City Alliance, was a historic port city. There, the sizeable commercial cities located in the Netherlands at the Germanic and Franc borders had preserved a loose union by forming a mutual alliance. The alliance was managed by an independent parliament formed of merchants and the noble bureaucrats who paid them. As the Alliance had no official police or national defense, mercenary nobles received commissions from the Alliance to carry out military matters as freelance agents. The Maylen family, headed by Jan, was one such set of mercenary nobles.

As mercenary nobles by birth, the Watteau family of Bruges had inherited the post of Chief Inspector. Ten years ago, they had been attacked by vampires in their residential castle, and the entire manor had been destroyed in one night. Directly after that tragedy, Jan—who was a junior inspector at the time—helped the chaotic Alliance regain its tranquility. Due to such distinguished service, he had been appointed the youngest chief inspector in history.

Lately, however, the government's stock in Jan had been crashing. After the Watteau family was wiped out, Jan hadn't been able to completely subdue the menace of the Count Four—the vampire tribal alliance that quickly took over the underworld. Already, one part of the parliament motioned to reshuffle Jan to a different

position.

At a time like this, if the Vatican were to seriously intervene...

With a pained expression, Jan glanced down at the courtyard. His brown eyes took in the sight of a brilliant green lawn, a broad garden, and two shadowed figures laughing. He saw an impressive young woman with golden hair and a slender frame sitting beside a young girl, who was weaving a flower garland. Jan gazed absently at the two of them, taking in their shapely noses, kind smiles, and lively chatter. *They resemble each other.*

"If the Vatican ever were to find out that I'm working with the vampires, I'd be ruined. I'd lose everything—Rachel, Marie, everything."

"Father!" The high-pitched shout interrupted the chief inspector's gloomy thoughts. "Father, look! I made it!"

"What's wrong, dear? Why are you making such a gloomy face?"

Jan returned his attention to the courtyard below. His little girl proudly held up her flower garland.

His wife was looking up at him. She anxiously pushed back her hair. "You don't feel unwell, do you?"

"Hm? Ah, no, it's nothing, Rachel. Just thinking a little." Jan worked hard to smile at his wife, Rachel van Maylen, who furrowed her slender eyebrows.

"Next month is Marie's birthday party. I was puzzling over whom to invite. The mayor's wife, of course . . . parliament members, and the bank presidents. Well, it's a bother," Rachel said.

"Marie's birthday party?"

The little girl beamed. Both her golden hair, which was the color of sunlight, and her slender jaw were exactly like Rachel's. If she continued to resemble her mother in the future, she would be an extremely beautiful woman.

"Father, will you come to my birthday party, too?"

"Of course." With a smile so kind it seemed out of sorts with his ugly face, Jan nodded to his beloved daughter. He said confidently, "This year, I'll summon plenty of guests. I will have to go around and greet them, too. Yes, Marie, tell your mother to get a dress made. You should go into town and get a brand-new one."

"Really? Yay!"

The girl clapped her small hands and laughed; her voice sounded like a ringing bell. She danced a little, romping about mischievously, talking rapidly with her mother. Jan looked at the tranquil scene. / *wish this everyday life could go on forever.* . . .

"Well, as we've decided on a new dress, you'd better go quickly and shop. If you leave now, you can be back by this evening." Jan pushed off from the handrail and clapped his thick hands. "I also have business to take care of during that time. Let's eat dinner together tonight, Marie."

"Yes, Father!" The girl nodded vigorously, put on her flower garland, and ran off.

Smiling fondly, Jan started to return to his office.

"Um, dear?" His wife's anxious voice stopped him in his tracks.

When he turned around, Rachel was looking up at him with a slightly puzzled expression. "Are you that busy? Lately, you seem very tired. You're not overdoing it?"

"No need to worry, Rachel." The wind ruffled his orange hair. Jan smiled wryly, making the dark circles under his eyes more pronounced. "Lately, I've been a bit preoccupied with business matters, so I haven't gotten quite enough sleep. Don't worry."

"But ..." His wife looked very pale.

"It's okay. The work is mostly finished. The rest will be done once I sign some documents. If you don't mind, may I go shopping with you, too?"

"Eh? But you're tired—"

"When I see Marie's smiling face, my fatigue evaporates. Good, it's settled, then. Wait a little while longer. I'll be done here soon. When I am, the three of us will go out. When the dress is taken care of, we'll shop and wander around the city a bit. Yes, maybe the three of us should eat out; it's been a long time."

His wife opened and closed her mouth two or three times, as if she wanted to say something; in the end, she merely nodded.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Jan said, "Go get ready with Marie. I'll come down soon. Ah, have somebody get the horse and carriage ready. The city's full of danger these days."

"All right." She turned to obey him. As he returned to his office, she called out, "Dear, don't work too hard, all right?"

"I won't overdo it." He muttered to himself as he sat down at his desk: "As long as I don't lose you two." Propping his chin on his intertwined fingers, Jan listened to his daughter's and wife's lovely voices recede into the garden.

Talk about marriage proposals had come up, now that Marie was about to turn five. Jan wanted Marie to have a fantastic birthday party, which also would serve as her social debut. Jan himself was a third-class nobleman and had gotten engaged very late in life. He wanted his daughter to marry the son of a distinguished family when she was young, so together they could build a happy home. For the sake of her future happiness, he desperately wanted to avoid a scandal.

"Jan van Maylen?" called a voice as sharp as a steel blade.

Jan noticed that he'd carelessly left the terrace window open. A refreshing breeze blew in from the sea. Beyond the fluttering curtains, an ominous black shadow stood. It looked as if night itself had invaded.

"Who are you?" Casually, Jan slid his hand toward the sword at his hip. He was an excellent swordsman, as was expected of a

mercenary noble. However, this stranger had slipped into his heavily guarded mansion. He couldn't be any old intruder. Watching very carefully for an opening, Jan slowly shifted the upper half of his body. "I don't meet people for the first time without an appointment. Go talk to my secretary."

"This isn't our first meeting," the intruder grated out.

The stranger carried a long iron rod in his right hand. Jan couldn't make out his features because the man was wearing a hood — but at any rate, the man seemed about Jan's age, perhaps a little younger. Jade-green eyes shone sinisterly from underneath the hood. Perhaps the flames of hell, if they could be frozen in time, would glitter this color.

"No, maybe it is our first meeting, Jan van Maylen — here, at least."

"Hmph!"

In a flash, Jan kicked back his chair and sliced his sword through the intruder's shadow.

There were no sounds of flesh rending or blood gushing. Instead, a high-pitched clash of metal rang out. Jan's favorite blade was shattered by the man's iron rod. Jan's eyes widened and he dropped his fighting stance.

"You broke my sword!"

When it came to swordsmanship, no one in the Alliance could best Jan. There might have been one man who could have beaten him; that man died ten years ago, though, so Jan could boast that he was unmatched. Jan was confident that he could defeat any vampire, let alone a mere man. Yet, he'd been bested so easily!

"As always, your movements waste too much energy, Jan."

The intruder quietly laughed at the chief inspector, who was frozen in shock.

The second Jan had drawn his sword, the stranger's shadow had slid out of his reach, moving in front of Jan's left hand. His opponent

had expected Jan's attack, but Jan was in no position to realize that at the moment. Jan was in shock, his eyes wide open, as if he'd witnessed the resurrection of someone long dead.

"Hugue?" Jan recognized the man with streaming gold hair. "Hugue de Watteau! Why are you here?"

A strong wind swept passed the young nobleman, who was about to die of shock. The iron rod struck his chest; Jan was flung backward. He fell, screaming as his spine cracked. The chief inspector writhed in pain.

"It's been a while, Jan," Hugue coldly whispered. "Or should I call you Chief Inspector? I congratulate you on your advancement."

Jan looked up at the intruder's beautiful white face and golden hair. He saw the man's jade-green eyes, full of grief. It was unmistakably Hugue de Watteau, the eldest son of the Watteau family — and Jan's childhood friend. The one rival he couldn't beat.

He should have died ten years ago. How . . . ?

"Wh-what have you been doing for ten years, Hugue?" Jan barely managed to speak. "You didn't contact me. I've been worried this whole time."

"Worried?" Hugue's lips stretched into a smile. He stood at his full height. "Weren't you worried about yourself, Jan? Did you fret that I might take back the honor and position you'd earned by selling out my family to vampires!"

"Guh!" Jan gave out a strangled cry as he took a hard strike to the pit of his stomach.

Bottomless malice and hatred radiated in Hugue's eyes as he watched Jan double over. "Painful? I'll bet. It's nothing compared to the kind of pain my family went through, though."

The young avenger's hand barely moved. His iron rod snapped apart. White light flashed, casting shadows across Hugue's face. The iron rod had a blade built into its center. He swung the weapon upside down and bellowed out his hatred and rage.

"This is revenge for my family. Die in pain, Jan van Maylen!"

"Wait! Listen to me, Hugue. I'm being used by Count Four!"

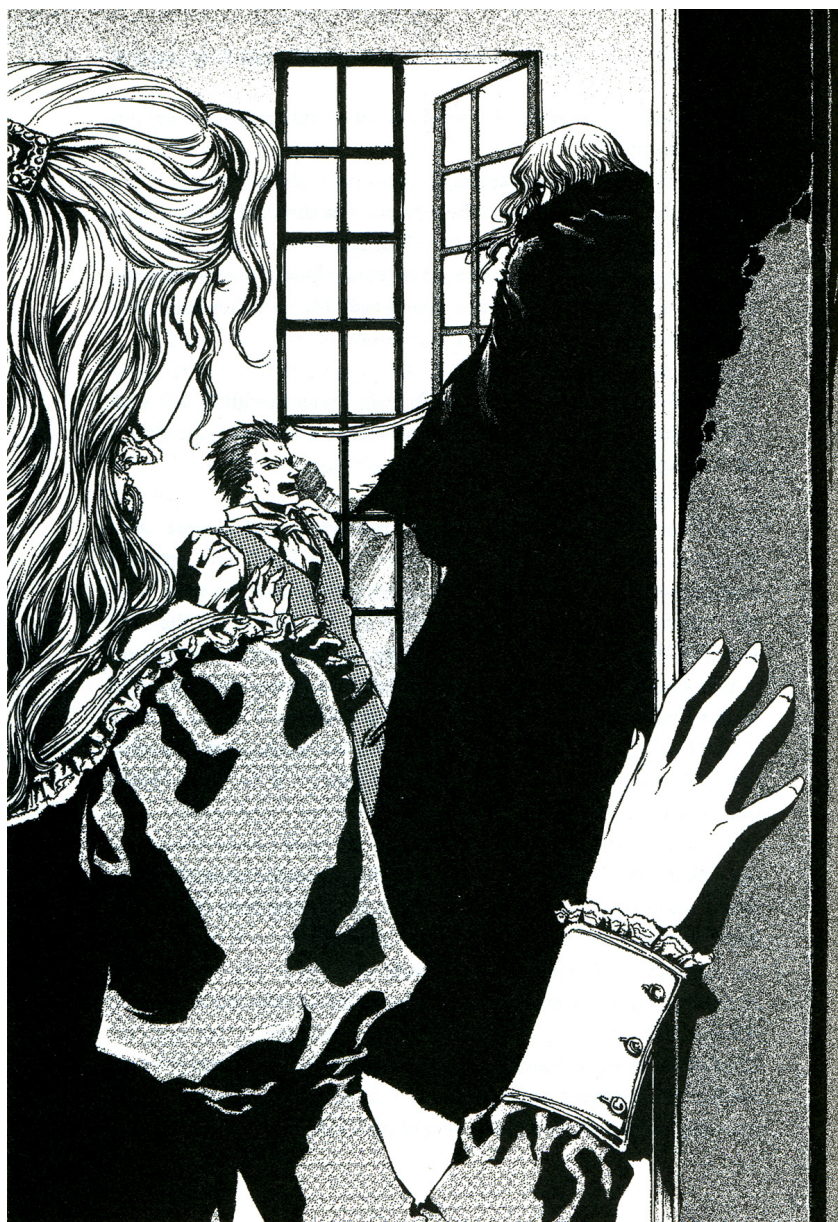
"I won't listen!" He thrust down his naked sword — and then froze.

A polite knock at the door and a woman's soft voice interrupted his attack. "Dear, may I come in for a minute?" The door opened. A slender woman stood in the doorway. "How is your work coming? Marie is sulking, saying, 'Isn't Papa ready yet?'"

"Keep out!" Jan cried, forgetting about the deadly weapon mere millimeters from his head. "Don't come in, Rachel!"

Hugue forgot all about Jan in that instant. "Rachel?" His expression changed from one of rage to shock.

"Eh?" Rachel wore the exact same expression. She was about to scream at the sight of the sword thrust at her husband; then, she paused in amazement when she glanced at the swordsman's face. "It can't be ... Hugue?"



"I'll hear the rest of what you have to say, Jan van Maylen!" Hugue twirled his blade up and then put it back into its sheath. "Tonight at ten, come to the place where you and I first met. Come alone. If you don't, I'll publicize everything about your ties to the vampires!"

"Ah! Wait!" Rachel cried. She had regained her senses as if a spell had been broken. Now, she screamed at the dark shadow that was running out onto the terrace. "Hugue! Wait, tell me—!"

"Stop, Rachel!" Jan managed to stand up in front of his wife, who was going to run after the swordsman. He held her back. "It's dangerous! Don't follow him! Don't follow him!"

"Why was Hugue—?"

"No! That's not Hugue!" Hugging his wife tightly, Jan said, "No, Rachel. He's a terrorist. He meant to assassinate me. When you suddenly came in ..."

"Terrorist? His face—"

"Yes, I was surprised at first, too. However, Hugue died ten years ago. How could a dead man come here? The terrorist happens to resemble Hugue, that's all." Jan prattled at his wife, who still couldn't be persuaded. He picked up the phone on the wall and said, "At any rate, I'll call somebody and increase the mansion's guards. He still might be nearby. Rachel, you stay with Marie. No matter what happens, don't take your eyes off her!"

"But . . . very well." Rachel was still far from calm; however, she nodded at the mention of her daughter. "I'll be with Marie. Be careful, dear."

"I love you, Rachel."

Watching his wife quickly leave the room, Jan picked up the phone and dialed with trembling hands. The scant time it took for the circuit to connect seemed like an eternity.

Hugue . . . I didn't believe you were still alive!

The expression his wife had worn when she'd seen Hugue ... *What is that about?*

It hadn't been shock. It wasn't an expression of longing for an old friend. Her eyes conveyed a raw feeling, tinged with heat—and the same expression had show on Hugue's face. *They were lovers.* . . .

A high-pitched nasal voice answered the phone. "*Ja?*"

"It's Maylen." He forced himself to breathe. "Is this a good time? I have important information about the death of the Count of Amsterdam."

He swallowed reflexively, the taste in his mouth as bitter as poison.

II

The cathedral, in which remodeling work would begin tomorrow, was completely deserted that night.

The silence that hung in the magnificent hall was exactly as he'd remembered. The gracefully arched vault, the colors of the old stucco paintings on the walls, and the candles lined up on the gilded altar all looked the same.

Notre Dame Cathedral.

Silently repositioning his beloved sword on his back, Hugue looked up at the altar.

The moonlight shone through a stained glass window, making the triptych that spread beyond the altar glow white. The light fell on the center of a picture depicting a lamenting crowd lowering the corpse of Christ from his cross. However, as mesmerizing as that painting was, the robed swordsman was staring at the picture hanging below it.

The artist depicted Mary, pregnant with Jesus, lovingly stroking her round stomach. When they'd first visited this cathedral almost twenty years before, the sight of that painting had made Hugue and Jan confused. Although Mary had received God's blessing and carried the Christ child, she had married Joseph as though nothing had happened. After she safely gave birth to Christ, she had other children with her husband. What in the world had she been thinking?

A little girl, who always followed those two boys around like a loyal knight, had said nonchalantly, "A woman's love is complex. Women never love only one person."

The two boys had looked at each other as if to say, "Who can understand women?"

A faint noise roused the swordsman from his bittersweet memories. "You came?"

His jade-green eyes regained their sharp sparkle. He could hear multiple footsteps coming from the church's entrance. Hugue drew his beloved sword and carefully counted the steps.

Twelve men?

That was a little unexpected.

That traitor. Hugue wasn't naive enough to think Jan would appear alone. Twelve people weren't enough to stop him, though, and they both knew it. Maybe it was a trap to tempt him to underestimate Jan's treachery. After all, Jan was the chief inspector. On top of the anti-terrorism elite corps and military police squads, he could mobilize regular policemen throughout the Four City Alliance. He had plenty of men to command for this ambush.

Hugue cautiously hid in the dark and glared at the figures that appeared beyond the doorway. One was short and slender. The two that followed were stout. He would have to kill them in the same instant he unsheathed his sword, so they wouldn't have time to cry out.

"Did you see him here?"

When the clear voice reached his ears, Hugue's heart stopped beating for an instant. No, it wasn't his heart that stopped; time itself froze.

"A woman's love is complex. Women never love only one person."

The moonlight illuminated the face of Rachel van Maylen, the chief inspector's wife. She turned to her two companions. "The priest is in this cathedral?"

"Yes, unmistakably. The priest you're searching for is certainly here. I saw him go in with my own eyes," a man with a scar on his cheek answered in a coarse voice. He was one of the city's many ruffians. He and his large, red-haired partner gazed at their surroundings.

Rachel, why are you here?

Hugue suddenly understood. These men were police informants. If the commissioner's wife was here . . .

Involuntarily biting his lip, Hugue looked at his former fiancée. She had the pale skin and golden hair characteristic of the *lehento*—city nobles. Her clear emerald eyes looked the same. Nothing about her had changed in ten years' time—except for the ring on her left ring finger, which told Hugue she was far beyond his reach now. Yes, his former fiancée was another man's wife. She was married to a man he hated and would kill in revenge.

In the dark, Hugue ducked down.

He hadn't intended to speak with her. Soon, he would have to kill her husband and avenge the family that Jan had destroyed. How could he face her knowing that?

"Thank you for your help. Please, have something tasty to eat on me!" Rachel said, putting some coins into the ruffians' hands.

Hugue slowly retreated so as not to be caught in the flickering light of Rachel's lantern. He threaded his way through the pillars close to the corridor.

"Wh-what are you doing? Take your hands off me!" Rachel's flustered voice reached him.

"Missus, this is hard to say, but isn't this amount too little?" The man with the scar gripped the lady's hand. He brought his face close enough to breathe on hers and whispered in a menacing tone, "Didn't we hurry here as a favor to the chief inspector's wife? Can't we persuade you to give us a little more than this?"

"If that's the case . . ." Unable to hide her fear, Rachel tried to take out more money.

The ruffian grabbed her lace purse and laughed in a nasty way. "A married lady like you, wandering around the city to search for a priest in the middle of the night — it isn't proper. If your husband knew, what would he do?"

"Are you threatening me?" Rachel's voice got louder for a moment, but then she whispered, "What . . . ?"

"What will happen to you?" Wearing vulgar smiles, the two ruffians edged up to the lady.

"Let go of me!" Flinching from the stench of their breath, Rachel desperately struggled to escape.

Grinning as if he enjoyed her resistance, the scarred man called to his partner, "Johann, you hold her hands tight. Don't let her go."

However, Johann didn't answer. Eyes downcast, he merely stood there.

"Huh? What's wrong, Johann?"

Johann's large body collapsed.

"That's far enough, if you still value your life," Hugue quietly warned, his iron rod at the ready.

"Wh-what? Th-that priest!" The scarred man groaned, disconcerted by the priest who had appeared like a ghost. He drew his pistol at once. "Where are you hiding?"

"I warned you." A clear, metallic sound echoed throughout the cathedral.

When he tried to point his weapon at the priest, the scarred man noticed something was wrong. The gun no longer had a muzzle. "Huh?"

Grasping the broken weapon, the ruffian's mouth gaped open. A beautifully arced blade was thrust at the tip of his nose. The blade had skewered his gun's muzzle.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

"Eek!" The scarred man threw away his handgun and fled the church without looking back.

"It's simply terrible to abandon a comrade." Hugue smiled sarcastically, gazing at the large man and the ruins of the iron rod on the floor. He kicked away the iron rod, which could explode at any moment.

"Hugue?" Rachel's shaking voice stopped the swordsman in his tracks. "Hugue. It is you, Hugue."

"You have the wrong man." Commanding his body to turn away, Hugue wiped clean his expression. "I'm a wandering priest, not that person. Excuse me."

"Hugue!"

The priest tried to run away, but he couldn't manage to shake off the soft, slender arms that tenderly embraced him. A low sob and hot tears soaked into the back of his robe.

"Why? Why! If you were alive, why did you leave me all alone?"

Hugue couldn't open his mouth. There were too many things he wanted to say. He couldn't say them to her in this place. The most he could get out was: "Are you getting along well with Jan? Is he good to you?"

"Yes." The face pressing against his back nodded after a short hesitation. "He's very kind. We have a daughter, Marie; she'll be five next month."

"I see," Hugue muttered, turning his crying eyes toward Mary on the altar. "You're happy, aren't you?"

"Yes." This time, Rachel nodded immediately. Behind him, he heard a slight rustling noise. *Is she wiping away her tears?* He turned around to see.

"Why did you come to Antwerp, Hugue?" she whispered.

He couldn't tell what she was thinking, because her beautiful face lacked expression.

Her voice trembled. "Not something to do with my husband? You

were with him in the mansion today, right? Could my husband have something to do with what happened to your family?"

"No." Every single heartbeat seemed to last an eternity. Hugue shook his head. Indicating the robes he wore, he explained nonchalantly, "As you can see, I'm with the Vatican now. Do you know about the murder in the old Amsterdam church a few months ago? I was ordered to investigate it. I went to Jan thinking I could get some information from him. It had nothing to do with what happened ten years ago."

"But, today ..."

The way both men had faced off in her husband's study couldn't have looked like old friends apologizing for falling out of touch. The priest lightly shrugged his shoulders, but Rachel's suspicious expression didn't change.

"I didn't go through proper procedures, so the chief inspector refused to share information. It got a bit . . . complicated. He's always been a stuffy man. He hasn't changed."

"I see." Her shoulders sagged and she let out a big sigh. The color came back into her beautiful face, which had been pale and tense. Rachel lowered her eyes as if relieved. There was clearly a note of urgency in her voice, though. "Hugue, leave this city at once."

"What?"

The lady repeated herself. "Leave this place. If it's information you want, I'll take care of it. Leave this city tonight and don't come back again."

"What do you mean, Rachel?"

"Don't ask me why. Please, Hugue, promise me!" Grasping her former fiancé's robes, Rachel shouted hoarsely, "Don't come near this city anymore!"

"I can't do that." *Why is she so upset?* Looking perplexed, Hugue shook his head. "I have a job to do. I can't abandon my responsibilities."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what. What's this all about, Rachel?"

Through the folds of their clothing, he could feel her heart pounding. Sealing away the desire to hold his former lover until she calmed down, Hugue asked again, "Why is it a problem if I'm here? Do you know something?"

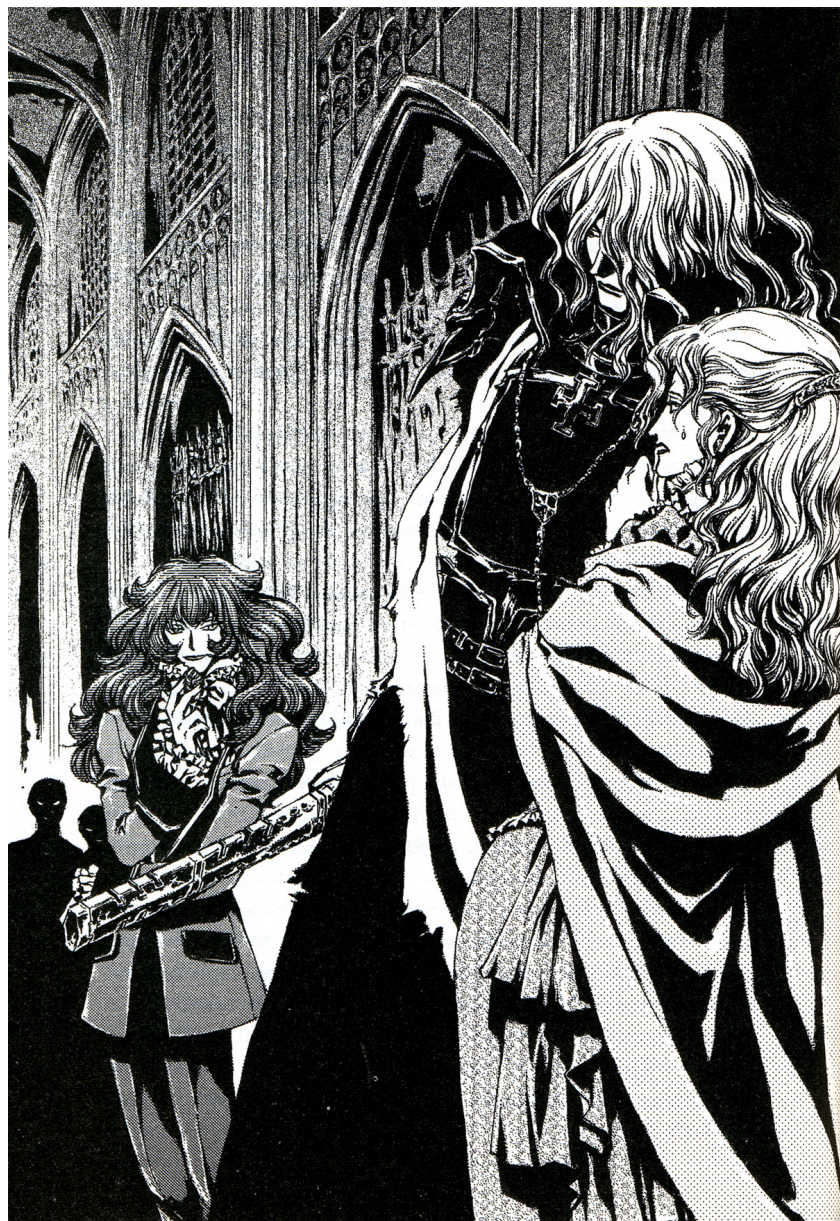
"I . . ." Her beseeching eyes gazed at him. Faintly trembling, Rachel said, "When you're near, I ..." Her words were spoken so softly, it was difficult to hear. Regardless, it was clear what she was requesting.

"No, Rachel."

Hugue tried to avert his gaze. She wouldn't allow it. Her slender hand gently captured the swordsman's face. Sighing, she softly pressed her lips to his firmly closed mouth.

The sound of someone clapping interrupted them. "Oh dear, oh dear." The shadow of a slender man silently took form inside the church. "Oh, merciful night, blessed by the pale moon, full of darkness that resembles death. How very short the lovely night is."

"Who are you?" Frightened, Rachel clung to Hugue.



Hugue instantly perceived his opponent's true form. He bitterly repented his own carelessness, letting a vampire get this close!

"I'm Hans Memlink. People call me the wandering poet." (He called himself that, but he was the only one—and he hadn't wandered anywhere; however, the young vampire fancied his prey to think it was true.) Sharp fangs descended from his mouth, piercing a rose bud that matched the color of his tuxedo.

"One of Count Four, I am the Count of Antwerp. Ah, we're Count Three now, aren't we? Father Hugue de Watteau, you killed one of us."

Ten sinister shadows stood up all around the church. Sharp sparks spewed from their mouths.

"Now then, it is the height of boorishness to interrupt someone in the middle of a tryst, but there's something I must ask the priest. Please, come with me; bring that beautiful lady, too."

"What a coincidence. There's something I want to ask you, too, Hans Memlink." Gazing into the vampire's purple eyes, Hugue laughed provocatively. "There's no need to change locations. I'll have you versify right here, you hack poet."

"'Hack poet'?" Metal ground against metal as the vampire rubbed his barbed fingernails together. "How dare you call me a 'hack,' you damned Terran?"

"Maybe I should have said 'would-be poet'?" Hugue deliberately shrugged his shoulders, casting a sideways glance at Memlink. "I'd already heard of a strange vampire in Antwerp who heedlessly spews out bad poetry; the real thing is worse than I'd imagined."

"Damn you!" Memlink disappeared. He'd leapt away at unstoppable speed. With the grace of a feline, he sank his fangs into the priest's neck. "Got you."

Hugue's hand pressed a small switch he'd been gripping secretly. White smoke burst up, and a pungent odor assaulted the vampire's nostrils.

"Uh, whoa!" Memlink's sharpened senses became a liability for him. The count and his minions reflexively covered their faces against the white smoke that rapidly filled the church, temporarily halting their attack.

"Run, Rachel!"

The bombs Hugue had set in preparation for Jan's and the police's expected assault suddenly exploded. Hugue grasped his former fiancée's hand. He began to run, dragging her along.

"I won't let you escape, priest!"

A crimson shadow danced before his eyes. Brandishing fifteen-inch claws, Memlink tossed back his hair and howled, "Who's a 'hack poet'?"

"You are," Hugue chided, twirling the iron bar in front of his body. Parrying the vampires barbed claws, he suddenly remembered the words of the nun he'd met in Amsterdam a month before: *"A noble with chestnut hair and light purple eyes."*

The description of the vampire who had attacked the old Amsterdam church and killed all the workers there matched the features of the self-styled poet before his eyes. His appearance also was in keeping with the testimony Carrel van der Verf had given in Amsterdam before he died.

"This vampire attacked Oude Kerk. Rachel, you stay there. Don't move at all."

"H-Hugue?" His former fiancée anxiously looked up at him.

Seeing his own gruesome reflection in her eyes, Hugue coldly said, "Rachel, the man you knew doesn't exist anymore. He died ten years ago. Upon seeing his family butchered and his house burned down, he died in shame. The man before you . . ." With admirable stealth, the priest drew the iron rod to his hip. "I'm merely an angel of death."

There was a piercing scream. One of the vampires who had been sneaking up on them was cut in half. His severed corpse hit the

floor. A cloud of blood rose up, and the blade in the priest's right hand shone with a sinister, crimson glow.

"What the hell is that guy doing?" Memlink's eyes bulged out. He didn't bother to wipe his comrade's blood off his face.

The priest's blade revolved again. A beam of rainbow-colored light flashed, and another vampire, who had leapt at Hugue from the right, bent back in agony, his heart pierced through.

"So fast? Or ... slow?" Watching the blade rupture the other vampire's heart, Memlink was struck dumb. The reaction speed of a Methuselah was ten times faster than a Terran's, which made Hugue's movements seem slow enough to bore a vampire to tears. So how was he killing Memlink's brethren so easily?

"Do you know what 'optimization of motion' is, monster?" The swordsman smiled thinly as he sent a third vampire's head flying. "When I make a certain motion—for example, the simple act of moving my hand up and down—without fail, there is a waste of time and energy in that motion. The subtle shaking from left to right, muscle strain, eyes tracking things, making corrections while executing the movement—this normally accounts for thirty percent of the total effort."

Light flashed for the fourth time. Memlink, as if he were trapped in a nightmare, heard his minions' screams overtop the sounds of flesh being torn apart.

"Certainly, a human's nervous system does not relay signals from the brain with a speed equal to a vampire's nervous system. However, your reflexes are about thirty percent faster than a human's. If I am efficient when I adjust my movements, your advantage is no more than two or three percent. In the end, when I brandish my sword, if I can predict my opponent's movement, I can optimize my motions one hundred percent."

A fifth vampire was trying to bite Hugue's neck. His scream was cut short as the priest's blade sliced through his brain.

"It's extremely easy to beat you when you waste your speed."

"Dammit!" Memlink's face twitched. He turned around and abandoned his hard-pressed comrades. The fleeing vampire tried to accelerate into haste mode, but he wasn't fast enough.

Hugue was about to make mincemeat of the Count of Antwerp's head; however, at that instant, a gunshot rang out and a fierce pain lanced through his shoulder. "Ugh!"

The point of his sword missed its target, but he managed to slice off a lock of the Methuselah's hair. In severe pain, Hugue barely could shake his head. He saw Rachel, pale and on the verge of crying. In her hand was a ladies' Derringer pistol. White smoke trailed out of its tip.

She'd probably been trying to cover him—but an amateur couldn't hit a vampire. Holding his shoulder, which was gushing blood, Hugue shouted, "Rachel, don't shoot! At your skill level, you won't be able to aim accurately! Go hide somewhere."

"Look away for a second, and I have the advantage, Father!" Memlink roared, attacking with his claws out.

Hugue reflexively tried to draw back, but a second gunshot rang out.

The priest stumbled as the bullet gouged his flank. Memlink sideswiped him when he was vulnerable. He made an effort to parry, but he couldn't match the vampire's strength, which was equal to that of a polar bear. His blade flew through the air and clattered against the wall.

Blood gushed from Hugue's mouth, which was open in a soundless scream. He slid down the wall and rolled to the floor.

"Serves you right, Father!" Memlink laughed. He stood tall over the groaning priest, preparing to thrust his barbed claws into Hugue's throat.

"Hugue!" Rachel screamed. She couldn't help him because another vampire had taken hold of both her hands.

The poet chuckled unpleasantly as he lifted Hugue's chin by the tip

of one claw. "You gave us considerable trouble. Indeed, / killed the priest and framed that idiot, Carrel. Nevertheless, I don't understand: Why did you come to Antwerp? After you cleaned up that Oude Kerk priest and killed Carrel, why didn't you go back to Rome?"

"Cleaned up?" In pain, Hugue stared dimly at the vampire. Memlink's hands were delicate, like a woman's. They were white, soft, and stainless.

Without one stain? He recalled the sister's words: *"Something in the palm of his hand . . . like a tattoo of a flower."* Hugue's green eyes opened wide. *It's not this guy!*

"Nobody move!" someone roared.

The cathedral doors were flung open forcefully. Dozens of human forms carrying floodlights invaded the church. Armored men with heavy weaponry closed in.

"A mobile police squadron!" Memlink's eyes opened so wide that they nearly fell out. "This is ridiculous! Why are they here? You can't have betrayed us, Maylen!"

The vampires bared their fangs and screamed, but the high-pitched sounds of machine guns drowned them out.

III

"Father?" A small girl opened the door. When he lifted his gaze from the telephone, Jan opened his mouth in surprise. "What is it, Marie? Aren't you asleep yet?"

"There are so many strange men outside my room." The girl, anxiously hugging her favorite teddy bear, ran to her father. She said, "I'm sort of afraid."

"It's okay, Marie." Smiling clumsily, Jan drew his face close to his daughter. He poked at her soft cheek with his knotted finger. "Those men are good people. They'll protect you and Mother from bad people who want to come into the house."

"Bad people?" Hugging the big bear tightly, Marie tilted her innocent face toward him. "Father, are bad people coming to the house?"

"No, that's . . ." Noticing that he'd accidentally made his daughter more frightened, Jan hurriedly shook his head. "The bad people won't come. It's okay. Um, those men are here just in case."

"Just in case'?"

Baffled, Jan scratched his head. "How should I put it? They are here for Mother's sake. She was afraid, so I'm protecting the house with these guards."

"Didn't Mother go out?"

"Go out?" Jan frowned at his beloved daughter's words. *Rachel was resting with our daughter, wasn't she?* "What do you mean, Marie?"

"Mother said she had business in town. I was alone in the room. I got lonely, so I went to you."

"Marie, wait a minute." Stroking his daughter's hair, Jan summoned a guard. "Hey, isn't anybody there?"

What in the world is Rachel doing, going out at a time like this!

When Hugue had invaded their home, he'd lied to her, telling her it was a terrorist. Had he not convinced her they were in danger?

He recalled his wife's face when she'd seen her former lover. . . .

"Hey, somebody! Isn't somebody there?"

"Did you call, Chief Inspector?"

"You're slow! What have you been doing? When I call you, come at once!" Nervous and sick to his stomach, Jan was about to launch into a tirade; however, when he saw who entered the room, he froze and turned pale.

"Ah, I'm very sorry. I was busy. It took a little bit of work to kill all twenty guards."

"You!"

The young man before him was stained crimson from his head to the tips of his nails. His tuxedo was in tattered rags, riddled with countless bullet holes, and his hair was wildly messy. His face dripped blood. He licked his nails.

"Memlink! Why are you here? And what in the world is with your clothing?"

"What did you say? How dare you!" The blood-smeared vampire snickered; then, he smiled demonically. "You traitor! Plotted well, didn't you?"

For a second, it looked as though the young vampire had disappeared. Suddenly, Jan's body was slammed into the wall.

The vampire looked down at the chief inspector, who struggled to breathe. Memlink held Jan's little girl in his hands; she was unconscious.

"Ma-Marie! Count Antwerp, what are you going to do? What does this mean?"

"What am I going to do? That's my line! Killing my entire clan!" Memlink's fangs extended. Bounding to the window, the wounded Methuselah roared, "What was that police squadron doing there, Maylen? You tried to wipe me out along with that priest!"

"Wh-what are you talking about? I don't know anything about a police squadron!" It was true. All Jan had done was contact Memlink and betray Hugue's whereabouts. He hadn't given his subordinates any orders. "What are you saying?"

"You still pretend not to know?" The vampire's eyes focused on Marie's white face.

Seeing Memlink's purple eyes narrow with bloodlust, Jan screamed, "Stop! What are you going to do with Marie?"

"Isn't it obvious? She's dessert." Memlink laughed. He kicked Jan in his stomach, preventing the man from getting off the floor. Then, Memlink bared the nape of the girl's neck, deliberately making a show of it. "Yes, pretty, good veins. Doesn't your daughter look tasty?"

"Stop! Do what you want to me! Don't put your hands on that child!"

Jan tried to jump up, but his body wouldn't obey. He desperately stretched out his hand to his child as the vampire licked his long fangs. He watched in vain as Memlink pressed his lips to Marie's throat.

The window behind the vampire shattered.

When Memlink tried to tear out the girl's carotid artery, he discovered there was nothing in his arms except thin air. A strong night wind blew into the room. The girl fell to the floor ... along with Memlink's cleanly severed left arm.

"Gaaah!" the vampire screamed. His left arm had been cut off beneath the elbow.

Jan's eyes landed on a shadow that stood calmly under the spray of blood. "Hugue de Watteau!"

"You're next. Just wait." The swordsman tossed the unconscious girl to her father. At the same time, he attacked the vampire with his polished blade.

Memlink squealed. "Damn you!" He lengthened his right hand's barbed claws and gave a muddled roar. With unrivaled supernatural strength, Memlink kicked Hugue across the room. Hugue leapt into the air as though he weighed nothing, but the vampire pursued him, jumping off the floor, brandishing his claws. "Go to hell!"

"Omnes enim qui acceperint... Those who live by the sword ..." Hugue struck the wall. Ordinarily, such a collision would have broken all his bones and ruptured his internal organs, but he had rounded his body like a cat and landed with his feet on the wall. The swordsman absorbed the shock of his impact and quickly regained his sense of balance. He drew his beloved sword and gazed pitilessly at the vampire flying toward him.

"Gladium gladio peribunt . . . die by the sword. Amen!"

They flung themselves at each other. Memlink's claws gouged the swordsman's cheek. Five red lines burst open on his handsome face.

Meanwhile, Hugue had stuck his blade into his opponent's torso. The vampire's body had been severed from his right arm to his heart. He'd been thrust into the wall—and stayed there, unmoving.

Jan gasped as he watched the fierce battle end. He petted his daughter, who still lay unconscious on the bloodstained floor.

Is it over? Is my daughter safe?

"I've kept you waiting, Jan van Maylen." The swordsman, who'd been looking down at the vampire he'd slaughtered, turned around. "You're next."

"Uh— "

Hugue's whole body was dyed red with wounds, and his cassock

was torn to bits. He looked like a wraith. Bloodlust radiated from Hugue; Jan understood that the last ten years had turned his former friend into a demon. If Jan exerted all his effort, he still would be no match for Hugue.

"Die!" Hugue said, hefting his polished blade.

Jan didn't reach for his own sword. He couldn't bring himself to beg for mercy. Instead, he whispered, "I wanted to be a man worthy of Rachel."

"What?"

The blade stopped in mid-air, as if stuck.

Jan continued, in a daze: "As you see, I am ugly. Renowned simply for hard work and raw talent, the Maylen family was third-class mercenary nobility. My position and power clearly could not match for yours. That's not all. You were blessed with good looks, a prestigious family . . . you had everything — including Rachel."

"That's why you betrayed me?" The swordsman raised his voice, "You betrayed me and destroyed my family for that?"

"I'm sorry, Hugue. Forgive me."

Still holding his daughter's body, Jan couldn't lift his face under the weight of such shame and regret. He muttered in a trembling voice, "Forgive me. If I die, Rachel and Marie — "

"Knock it off!"

Jan didn't notice that the swordsman's face had blanched when he heard those names. He didn't notice that Hugue's sword was trembling faintly.

"How can you say such a thing, knowing what you did to my family, Jan? I won't forgive you! I absolutely won't forgive you!"

Hugue shouted, as if to remind himself of his vow. He brought down his sword. "Die!"

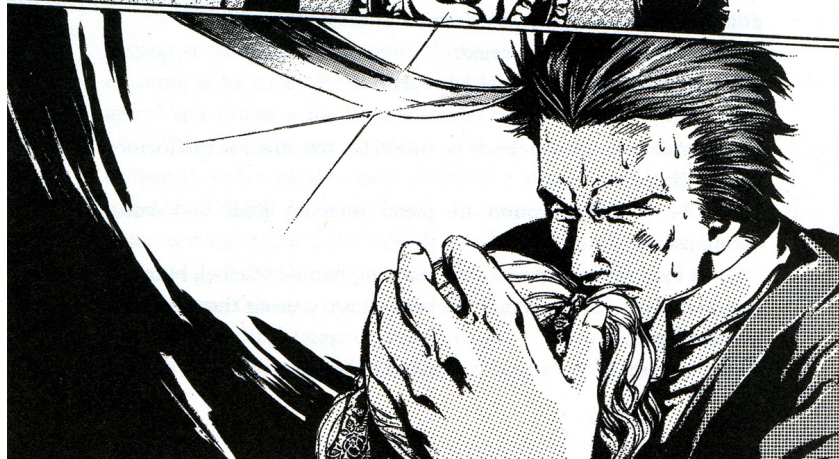
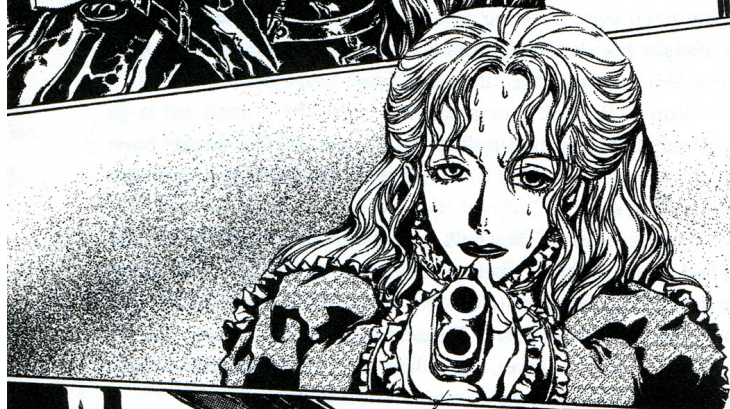
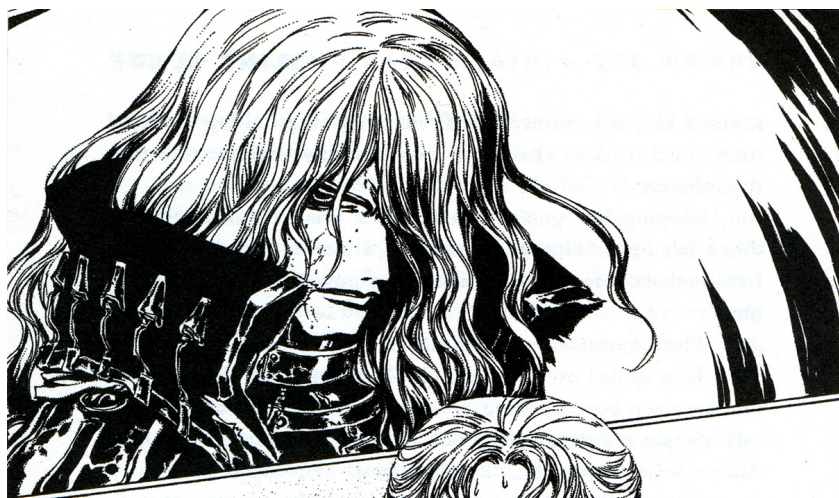
Jan reflexively closed his eyes. The life he'd forged through deceit and betrayal was over. For the past ten years, he had not once rested easy; often, he'd wake up screaming into the night. Whenever he heard his former friend's name, he felt burdened with guilt. Still, he had been happy. He had been able to live with his precious family—that was all he'd ever wanted. However, that, too, was now at an end.

Why am I still alive?

Jan was covered in sweat. He opened his eyes slightly. The polished blade dangled directly above his orange hair. He looked up at the demon who held the sword.

"Rachel." Hugue's eyes were focused on the slender woman standing in the doorway behind Jan.

Rachel held a gun in her hands. "Get away from him, Hugue." Her normally pale face was now as white as paper, and her narrow shoulders were heaving with labored breath. Despite her exhaustion, Rachel van Maylen's hands grasped the Derringer, unwaveringly aiming it at Hugue. "Please, get away from him, Hugue. If you don't, I'll shoot."



"When you fired those rounds in the church, you weren't aiming at Memlink, were you?" Hugue's eyes were devoid of any emotion as he gazed at his former fiancée. "Those bullets didn't go awry? You aimed at me from the first?"

"Yes. I knew you wouldn't give up on Jan. Disobeying my husband's order to stay here, I called a police squadron to the cathedral. I didn't expect to bump into vampires, though." Rachel's voice was quiet and calm. "Yes. If possible, I wanted you to let my husband go. I didn't want to watch you kill each other. So, I wanted you to leave this city, but you wouldn't give up!"

When she'd begged Hugue to leave the city, she'd already known the reason he'd come to Antwerp. Naturally, she'd noticed Hugue's clumsy lies. Pretending to go along with his story, she'd tried to chase him from the city without resorting to violence.

Keeping her gun pointed at her former fiancé, Rachel shook her head. "Hugue, I loved you. I wanted to be your wife. I swear that's true. However, I love Jan now. I can't live without him."

The swordsman remained silent.

Tears spilled over Rachel's cheeks as she gazed into Hugue's shining green eyes. Looking as though she might break down in sobs, she put her slender finger on the trigger. "Hugue, I love him. And he loves me, too. So, I'll protect him, even against you!"

"Stop it! Rachel!" Jan pleaded.

Rachel already had pulled the trigger. White smoke burst from the gun muzzle. Half a second later, the Derringer flew out of Rachel's hands.

"Hugue. Please!" Rachel's expression didn't change as she watched Hugue's blade flick away her gun. She put her hands together, as if appealing to God. "It's all my fault. He did it for me! Please, don't kill my husband. Please, Hugue."

Hugue didn't answer. Still silent as a stone, he pulled back, pointing the tip of his sword straight at Rachel's face.

"Stop, Hugue!" Jan cried.

His wife quietly closed her eyes.

Hugue lashed out.

Forcing his broken body to move Jan screamed at the former lovers, "Stop!"

The merciless sound of metal piercing flesh and bone extinguished Jan's cry.

A man in a red tuxedo was standing behind Rachel. Hugue's polished blade had skewered his brain stem, ceasing the vampire's movements forever.

"Memlink? He was still alive!" Jan gasped.

Rachel swooned.

"Rachel!" Jan held his wife close and glanced at the vampire's dreadful corpse. If the blade had moved slightly differently it would have gouged Rachel's neck. Shuddering, Jan noticed that the black-robed shadow was walking away from them.

"Hugue!" Jan shouted. "Hugue, will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you?" The swordsman turned around, sporting a hollow smile on his handsome face. The weapon he'd sheathed on his back made an uncanny metallic noise, as if responding to its master's voice. "Don't talk nonsense. I will never forgive you. However, there are those I have to deal with before I get to you, Jan. I'll kill you when I'm done with them."

"Hugue, you *can't* mean to go to Count Four!" Jan's voice sounded choked with tears. "Stop! The vampires already know about you. They've been on the lookout for you!"

"On the lookout'? Isn't that pleasant?" Hugue sneered. His green eyes filled with bottomless hatred and nihilistic fervor. "I have no home left. There's nobody waiting for me anywhere— except those monsters. I'll go to them, as they wish." He turned his back on Jan.

"Hugue!" Jan shouted again.

The swordsman's voice was a low rumble that echoed through the darkness: "I'm going. And I'll kill them all."

Marie was busy, getting ready to move.

Her father had quit his job as chief inspector, so they would have to leave this house soon. Although she was very sad to leave her home, Marie loved her parents, so she decided to bear with it.

"Besides, although the new house is a little old and small, it has a wonderful attic." Walking along the path that led from the courtyard to her mother's room, Marie talked about her new home to her dolls, which were packed away in a wooden box. "You'll like it, too. Hugue said he liked it very much."

The new doll her mother had bought her — which her mother had named Hugue, after a very handsome priest — was Marie's favorite toy. When they'd gone to inspect the new house the day before yesterday, she'd brought Hugue with her.

"I want to move to the new house soon — huh?" Marie's eyes grew round when she looked up at the main gate. A small figure came into the courtyard. The handsome young man with short brown hair was wearing a cassock similar to the one her doll wore. "It's a priest."

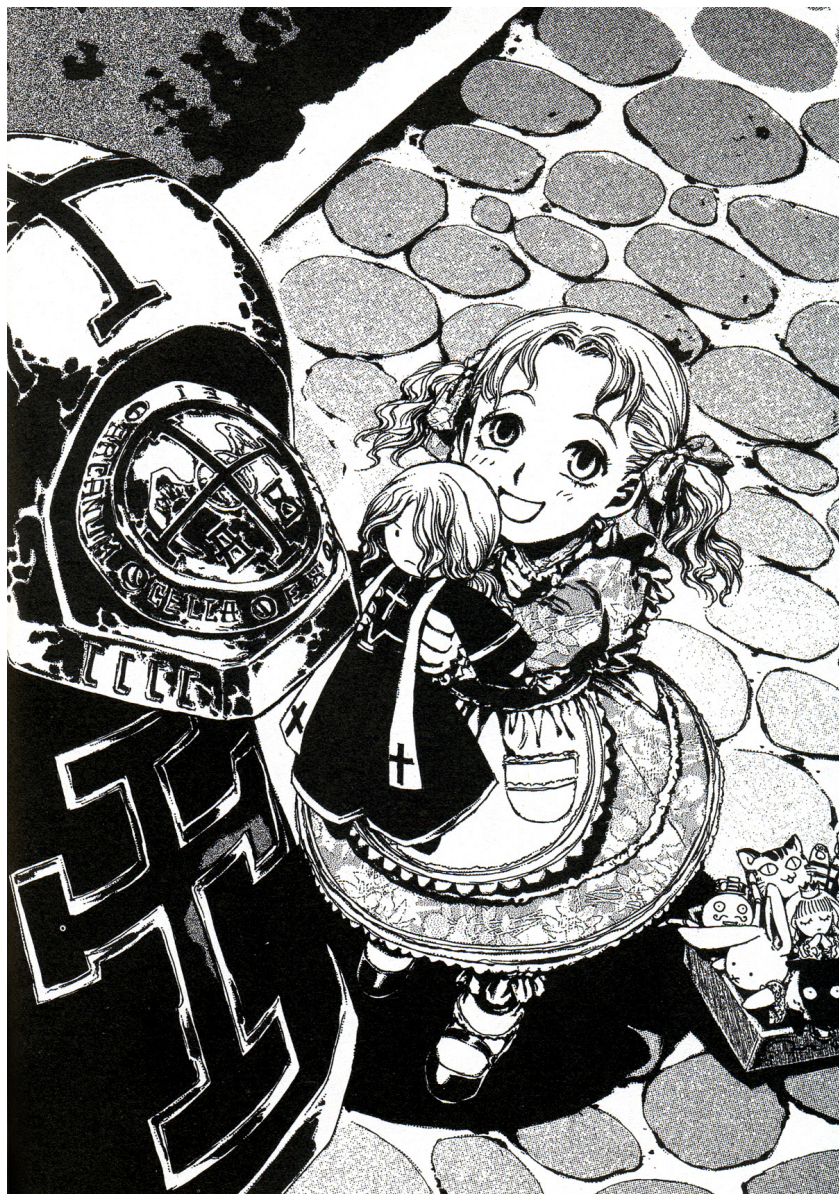
The man's eyes suddenly stopped on Marie. "I have a question." The priest walked toward her mother's room without having to ask for guidance. "Is this the mansion of Jan van Maylen? Input your answer."

Marie nodded, unnerved by the man's flat voice. "Yes, it is, but . . ."

As soon as he confirmed it was her house, the priest again began to

walk toward the inner gate.

"Father?" Marie timidly tried calling the priest, who silently turned around. "Father, are you a friend of Hugue?" She held up her doll.



The priest's expression didn't change when he heard the girl's question. He answered in a monotone, "Negative."